Trollope Society Big Read, 1 September 2025

Trollope's The Three Clerks, or The Ways in which We Work Now

by Ellen Moody

I've offered a few talks now where I presented my matter differently or chose a different approach from many of the talks we deliver to one another. This is another one. Since I'll probably break a few taboos, I cleared my plan first with Mark Green. I got permission.

The Three Clerks might be the most intriguing of Trollope's earlier books (it's the 7th if we count in the non-novel, *The New Zealander*). As we read, some irresistible autobiographical questions come to mind, questions we know we cannot have but want an answer to in order to understand the book. Trollope himself breaks real taboos. He has the temerity to include before mid-way in his novel, a long essay defending the civil service, critiquing some reforms well under way, which irritate him personally, but which he argues show the same indifference and lack of understanding of the nature and goal of public service, and disbelief yet self-interested exploitation of its usefulness that it is his business in both this book and its embedded metatexts to expose (Appendix A, "The Civil Service," 1989 Oxford *Three Clerks*, ed Handley, 555-71). Trollope also inserts no less than three parodies of novels as dreadful and tedious (two are mercifully brief) as the novels they critique (Chapters 19, "Afternoon," "Sir Anthony Allan-adale and the Baron of Ballyporeen" and for *The Daily Delight*, possibly another as yet untitled, and Chapter 22, "Crinoline and Macassar," Handley, 210-15, 240-68), one of which, unfortunately, *The Three Clerks* itself sometimes resembles. *The Three Clerks* has much undeniable novelistic excellence, like two unforgettable believable characters, a barrister, Mr Chaffanbrass (Chapter 40, Handley,464-74) whose defense of his lack of scruples is the core acceptable one still today. He is doing his job, which is to get his client off or with as light a sentence as one can conceive. There is an uncannily believable demon aristocrat, whom we have already met, Undecimus Scott (Chapter 8, Handley, 81-89), against whom Trollope is later explicitly concerned to prove how limited is the harm Dickens's idea of male evil, Bill Sykes, can enact (Chapter 44, "The Criminal Population is Disposed of," 515-19, especially following "I hang Bill Sykes with soft regret"). Many of us oldsters have come across Undy, more than once in our long experience and learned to avoid him. To demonstrate the significant originality of *The Three Clerks*, I have, you see, to discuss the whole trajectory of the book.

I agree with P. D. Edwards, who half a century ago, argued against a then and still continuing chorus of aesthetic condemnation, beginning with Michael Sadleir, that Trollope's wholly justifiable aim is to demonstrate how some seemingly egalitarian reforms in hiring practices, like exams competitive in school learning, much of which has little to do with the requirements or needs of the jobs at hand, can only make the service worse; and are irrelevant to what causes the problems one encounters when one tries to do the work of public service faithfully and well. Trollope wants us to realize how ignorant (so he thinks) Dickens's (note how Dickens is singled out again), enigmatic allegorical satire in *Little*

Dorrit about Circumlocation Offices where filling out complicated forms keep you from pinning down any particular work to any individual so that any customer's' grief is "Nobody's fault" (Chapter 10 of *Little Dorrit* "containing the whole science of government"). Trollope says that Mr. Dickens's mystery-filled satire is worse than useless and misleading; it's irrelevant and untrue. The thing to do (as Trollope is doing in *The Three Clerks*) is to put before us a realistic depiction of actual office life, and believable individualized employees going about doing whatever it is their "department" does. For two of our clerks, Alaric Tudor, and Harry Norman's department, *Weights and Measures*, the work includes going to Cornwall *to inspect* conditions, to get to know the people involved order to be watch them disinterestedly. A supervisor, with the appropriate name, Mr Fidus Neverbend, is supposed to accompany all transactions, braving the depths of the mines on slippery filthy ladders and in human buckets with a lump of mud on their foreheads in which a burning candle is stuck in order to record and measure, it is hoped, lawful ethical work and business practices. Trollope's proof that something is wrong is to make this novel end in a trial for insider trading of shares in the businesses the service is supposed to be supervising, and for a breach of trust. Alas, all this is explained in the unfortunately excised defense in defense of our three clerks as caught up in a situation whose norms they didn't make.Trollope argues forcefully in both the novel and his essay that civil service employees aren't paid enough directly. To read this, you must turn to *Appendix A* the back of the book (Handley 555-71), if it's there at all.

Among the couple points I'm going to make in my final paragraph is this is a novel by Trollope for which we have not even a half-way adequate edition to read. I doubt we can persuade Steven Armanick to perform another many year miracle as he and his team did for the abridged *Duke's Children*. The available edition of *The Three Clerks* most of us are reading is a 1952 reset of a 1907 reprint of the 2nd 1859 edition. This means you have three appendices to go back and forth between as you read. The experience of reading *The Three Clerks* reminds me of nothing so much as reading Walter Scott's Waverley novels, which can have as many as five appendices, not to mention a Scottish dictionary and further explanatory notes. Appendix B is made up of variously medium length paragraphs which Trollope excised before the first 1857 edition was printed, which Handley tells us are "minor cuts" yet "of great interest, particularly in relation to Harry, Alaric and Gertrude" (Handley, 572). Arguably, the inset novels make up part of Trollope's "serious protest" against atitudes of mind which includes screeds against Sir Robert Peel, and the detractors of the civil service (Edwards 85-87, Handley, Chapter 19,"How easy is the slope of Hell," 347-49; see also the "Explanatory Notes" to Appendix C, 607, ns. 346, 347, 348, on Peel's career).

Does it matter that we are reading a messed up yet inadequately annotated edition? Yes. We fail to understand that in all three male clerks' experiences this early we are given important bits of information about their journeys, to wit, Chapters 15, 17, and 24, namely, "Norman Returns to Town," " The Honorable Mrs Val and Miss Golightly" and "Mr M'Buffer Accepts the Chiltern Hundreds." In these Gertrude realizes but ignores that she and Alaric are living beyond Alaric's income, in order to

properly socialize, including going to a flower show, a "sad" imitation of a high fashion event at which she is condescended to but must attend as part of her wifely networking supportive life. We learn Alaric and Undy are engaged in share-buying, thus enabling us (if not Gertrude) to understand part of the monetary basis for the lifestyle which Gertrude wants. We see that Undy's persuasive talents have enabled Alaric to take charge of managing Uncle Bat's ward, Miss Golightly's £20,000 legacy. Undy (a busy alert man) keeps an eye out for a vacant MP seat because MPs cannot be put in debtor's prison. When Mr M'Buffer gives up his seat in parliament, Undy is after it. Sadly, he hasn't the money to win an election, so, he pressures Alaric into borrowing a considerable sum (£700) from the said uncle Bat, whose naivete Alaric previously sneered at and made fun of, even though Uncle Bat made Gertrude his heir on the understanding Alaric would marry her, because Uncle Bat thinks Alaric has "gumption" and is "smart." Captain Cuttwater (to give him his full retired title) assumes Alaric will, unlike Harry, naturally rise in the Civil Service. It wouldn't do, would it, for the good Captain to find out that Alaric, as a young man of considerately lower rank than Undy, must struggle to afford that chance at rungs of promotional ladders. Alaric has of course been engaging in money-making deals with Miss Golightly's legacy and been working to persuade the oblivious obtuse Charlie Tudor, Alaric's cousin to court and marry Miss Golightly.

As yet Undy only presses Alaric to do tit-for-tat favors (Handley 283), but in a not much later chapter (see Chapter 29, "Easy is the slope,' Handley 352), Undy will become less pleasant and threaten Alaric, i.e., explicily blackmail him, to make Alaric do his bidding. Again the point of telling a story where men win civil service positions which their own resources cannot shore up because of low salaries is to watch at least one slowly pushed into a criminal ruin.

Let's recall from the chapters we read two weeks ago, that Harry Norman declined to take the competitive exam because it included sophisticated college level math questions that Harry foresaw Alaric would do much better on than him, and gain the appointment even though Harry had rank, income and the kind of social manners necessary to succeed in bourgeois networking. Harry would, and Trollope thinks Harry should, have gotten it, if it had not been for the exam. Alaric and Charley are just the sort of borderline gentlemen whom the reforms are meant to help advance in life.

Another large amount of the content of our realistic fable-like story this week is the unfolding of the romantic and sexual infatuation of Katie, Gertrude's youngest or third sister with Charley Tudor, all the while we are told and can see neither has the worldly know-how, or ambition, like Gertrude, Katie's older sister, and Alaric, to succeed in a world where work works the way it does. A not unimportant point made emphatically is that Katie, like her sister, Gertrude before Gertrude was gifted by Uncle Bat, has no serious money (on this concept see Caryll Churchill's 1987 picaresque play, *Serious Money*).

Four of these chapters, might also be summed up as "24 hours in the as yet wretched self-berating

apparently spineless existence of the novel's local "hobbledyhoy," Charley Tudor: Chapters 18 through 21, and 23, again, to wit, "A Day with one of the Navvies – Morning," "Afternoon," "Evening," "Hampton Court Bridge,"and "Surbiton Colloquies" (Handley, 192-240, 268-75). Here to save time I recommend Laurie Langbauer who will take you through Charley's (I quote her) "graceless," "errant," "sentimental and annoying, cloyingly regressive, falsely nostalgic," "escapist," "ineffective recoil" from capitalism (111). I know you've heard some of this elsewhere, the domineering older woman with her helmit of a hat comes to embarrass Charley into marrying Norah Geraghty, an unmarried Irish working class barmaid, whom he may have impregnated; his unpunctuality when it comes to an ever increasing debt; his even more dismal, allegorically named friends, acquaintances, co-workers, and boss: Mr Corkscrew (familiarly known as "Screwy"), Mr Embryo, Mr Oldeschoole, Scatterall, and Mr Snape. Our story here includes the usual physically courageous heroic masculinity (John Eames rescued an old man from a bull, Charley rescues Katie from drowning), and hint of more than flirting, verbal sexual interchange with various working women Charley is not alone in regarding as "fun'. Think of Johnny Eames and his milliner-love, Amelia Roper and Madalina Demolines (how she lives as well with her mother as she does is not wholly clear) in *The Small House at Allingham* and *The Last Chronicle of Barset*.

I cannot resist taking a litttle time to elaborate on a startling parallel between Charley and Norah, and another more self-possessed" hobbledyhoy" John Caldigate and the widowed or separated adventuress, Euphemia Smithin the late novel, *John Caldigate*. I've never seen this ceremony presented and pointed to outside the visualization of Simon Grennan in his graphic post-text to *Caldigate, Dispossession* – and our text here (for which annotation is needed*)*. I remind everyone we just read *John Caldigate* and heard about *Dispossession* here. In Chapter 20, "Evening" at the *Cat and Whistle* (Handley 221-225) Charley allows himself to go through a lame version of the pre-1753 handfast marital ceremony that Euphemia and her friends say happened between her and Caldigate one night in Australia, which incident Caldigate does not quite deny. This centuries-old custom (continued in the American colonies in the 18th century well past 1753) consisted of saying in the present tense (tense was crucial) in front of at least 3 witnesses that you two are marrying right now as you hold hands (one day watch the serial adaptation of Diana Gabaldon's *Drums of Autumn*, or *Outlander* the fourth season, a mid-way episode). It's better to have a clergyman present and write down on paper with witnesses a record of what happened and have everyone sign, though this is not required in the way going to bed together that night is. Unlike in *John Caldigate* where our hero readily admits to living with Mrs Caldigate (as he calls her then), Charley's physical encounters with Norah off stage are not specified and his "yes" consists more in failing to deny he said yes when asked (Handley 227-228). The interest for me here is that in these two very different novels written far apart in time, with very different male and female characters Trollope is still resorting to what apparently in the mid-19th century was still in England a common seduction subterfuge. It's a commonplace to say is what is found in *The Three Clerks* in Charley's story is a more explicit working out under the guise of fiction of what Trollope tells of himself as a postal clerk in London in his *Autobiography*: a depressing, to him degrading debt-ridden

existence because he couldn't resist gambling, drinking, and pre-marital sex.

As has been said before by another far greater writer than me, let other pens dwell on guilt and misery. I quit such odious topics as soon as I can, like Trollope does in Charley and Norah's case. Like Mrs. Woodward (the mother of our heroines whom Trollope presents as exemplary) I cannot immediately excuse and forget Charley's behavior which could have adversely affected a young woman's life (pregnancy outside marriage) because Trollope himself dismisses her as unworthy respect or consideration by having one of his heroes whose development we are supposed to care about look upon her not mattering. When Euphemia Smith or the first Mrs John Caldigate persisted, Trollope punished her severely so perhaps we should be glad Norah's surrogate mother, Mrs Davis and she vanish from the text. The central serious concern in *The Three Clerks*, like many Trollope novels is the development of young gentlemen into successful married manly men (see Nicholas Dames, Mark King, Jennifer Ruth) who uphold the norms and foundational bases of a modern commercial society. Women in this book (and elsewhere) are of concern when they are of eligible rank and type to help this ethical gentleman hero create the prosperous family- based patriarchal norm.

To conclude, the novel's trajectory, its whole tidy plot-design, reaches its meaningful climax when one of its clerk-characters is found guilty of corruption, is disgraced and imprisoned, and must eventually emigrate to Australia to get a respectable job once again, and livable decent wage. In last, this and next week's chapters besides Charley's departures from virtue, we are also hearing about how what integrity Alaric has is disintegrating. He is surrounded by people who treat Neverbend as a crank, for what is his reward for never stooping? In the excised essay Trollope quotes from another published essay, *"On the Organization of the Civil Service"* (Handley 557-560) where I gather it's argued the civil service needs thoughtful reform, long term employees advanced on the basis of merit, knowledge and seniority. Trollope is arguing that beyond paying people enough, promotion from within based on seniority should be encouraged (he thinks people really bad at their jobs will be fired or leave out of *amour-propre*, 560). The electrifying drama, which features Chaffanbrass against Undy (Chapter 51, "The Old Bailey" Handley 474-92) which is the denouement of the book is there to prove the arguments of Trollope's essay and the action begun here, that competitive exams put "a premium on intellect at the expense of character" and it won't do.

Trollope's emphasis is unfortunately more anti-egalitarian than moral or based on skills and knowledge actually needed. Nontheless, Trollope says explicitly that these new reforms show the same disbelief in the usefulness of civil services that some aspects of the patronage system did. When he travels for the post office in later years (he wrote about this in *North America*) he will inveigh against how the US post office fired just about everyone from the highest to lowest positions each time there was an election and a different party won. He says in *North America* the state of service in the post offices he observes between the public and the department employees (long lines and waits, missing and lost packages, and illegal demands for more money at point of contact), is the result of not having anyone

around who is truly expert guiding everyone or who cares. He asks in the excised essay, Does not everyone know when it's time for high promotion especially, the people just below the top, the people who have been working there for years are hardly ever (=never) chosen. Surely, says he, there is some merit in long-time civil servants, and surely we should reward them because that will make people work harder, and make ambitious able people apply (Handley 560-61). We see why Dickens's targets for his satires incensed him against Dickens on this matter. Most Trollopians know Trollope himself quit his position in the post office in autumn 1867 because he felt he had been unfairly passed over for promotion, but also because he was ambitious to run for public office, wanted more time to meet the demands of his successful creative writing profession (Terry 71-72; Hall, Super).

I break one last taboo: be careful to keep all political discussion within the specific past the particular Trollope book is concerned with. I jump 30 years. What Trollope seems in part to be advocating is very like what happened in 1883 in the US to the federal service under President Chester Arthur. The Pendleton Civil Service Reform act put an end to varrious "spoils systems." It's usually talked about as it was worded: as being egalitarian, as giving all citizens a chance to compete for good jobs. What's not stressed is the particular work, the need for meaningful certificates of higher education and relevant training from colleges and universities. These things did come and are now in the US in danger of vanishing. Where Trollope is clearly wrong is his assumption a gentleman is more likely to be moral or above unlawful monetary gain or underserved promotion because he is probably from a well-to-do and connected family. A lot of people, upper, middle, lower class, or their whatever gender or gene pool, have as a legitimate goal in life to make a lot of money and live in luxury. There are some who are contented with a small percentage of the take.

Still I don't want to leave this central argument of Trollope's ignored and little understood novel with a historically based or cynical dismisal as well a meaning but misguided entertainment. Yes, the critique of the Civil Service we find argued over here and the transition that was generally happening was a change to accession and promotion based on ability from the old-fashioned class system, where it was "who you know", to a more modern (for mid-Victorian times) meritocratic system. This recognised that people of lower classes, different ethnicities, and religion, and eventually even different genders and races (previously almost untouchable) could rise in ability by their efforts. This was the beginning of a major change in the established system of things even if it still didn't include lots of people. At any rate it didn't favor Trollope's family and friends and he didn't like it. In TWWLN he does not like that money is being made by entrepreneurs, who had often risen from no where. In *The Claverings* he makes fun of the Burtons for their obvious anxiety over their dress and manner. Yes that he also didn't want women to work outside "home and family," outside of male control, was against them voting, the first step in power, and presents as ridiculous their desires to become doctors, lawyers, engineers. He displays endlessly pregnant married women, in effect compulsory pregnancy upon marriage, as simply a sign of a happy sex life or funny (as with the Quiverfuls). His world is by no means entirely gone today. Many today say the norm of meritocracy has become a fraud. I hope not. I'm heartened to report

trained and influential respected groups of people are resigning in large numbers from the US health public service.

On the other hand, what can this novel "with a purpose" say to us when we look just at it candidly. Many reading the book would call Harry Norman a prig, and think Linda leads an uninteresting life. We might find more potentialand room for maturing anf chnge in Charley and Katie and want to know what eventually was Alaric and Gertrude's life in Australia ion their own like. But equally to me to try to conclude or stay with Trollope as author and narrator and say narrowly that we need to live ethically, based on practical reality, and fairness, justice, equity is the equivalent of praying.

What we can do is start pressure for a good edition so people can at least understand what Trollope is on about.

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----------. *The Three Clerks*, intro N. John Hall. London: Trollope Society, 1992. The essay, "The Civil Service" has been reprinted in the original place. But the cuts from the first edition, 1857 were not restored.
----------. *The Three Clerks*, also introd. N. John Hall. London: Folio Society, 1992. With illustrations by Patrick Benson.

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