

Trollope's American Civil War Christmas Stories
“The Widow's Mite” & “The Two Generals”

There are a number of reasons why Anthony Trollope's Christmas stories are not well-known and infrequently read by anyone but dedicated readers of Trollope. Probably the most important is the attitude that he voiced towards “made-to-order” stories when asked by the owners of *The Graphic* to supply a Christmas story. His words may surprise some of us and therefore need to be heard full blast:

“I feel, with regard to literature, somewhat as I suppose an upholsterer and undertaker feels when he is called upon to supply a funeral. He has to supply it; however distasteful it may be. It is his business, and he will starve if he neglects it. Nothing can be more distasteful to me than to have to give a relish of Christmas to what I write. I feel the humbug implied by the nature of the order. A Christmas story, in the proper sense, should be the ebullition of some mind anxious to instill others with a desire for Christmas religious thought, or Christmas festivities, – or, better still, with Christmas charity. Such was the case with Dickens when he wrote his first two Christmas stories. But since that [,] the things [have to be] written annually [many others?] have had no real savor of Christmas about them ... Alas! at this very moment I have one to write, which I have promised to supply within three weeks of this time – the picture-makers [the story’s illustrators] always require a long interval, – as to which I have in vain been cudgeling my brain for the last month. I can't send away the order to another shop, but I do not know how I shall ever get the coffin made”
(*An Autobiography* 220)

We are many of us probably used to being told that Trollope was a writing machine, and when he sat down, the words just flowed – at a rate of 250 words “every quarter of an hour” (170). He avers elsewhere one of his strongest motives is commercial. Suddenly, we are confronted with a complication.

Lisa Niles has suggested that Trollope's short stories are hard to categorize, and I'd say none more so than the ones he wrote for the Christmas market. Betty Breyer's set sold by the Trollope Society, includes eight; but readers might be forgiven for not being aware of the presence or importance of Christmas in “The Two Heroines of Plumplington,” “The Two Generals,” and “Catherine Carmichael, or Three Years Running,” or the excluded very slender novella, *Harry Heathcote of Gangoil*. *Catherine Carmichael* takes place in New Zealand, and it centers on a coerced marriage, brutal husband, and the hardships of a colonialist life for ordinary white people. As with “The Two Generals” and *Harry Heathcote of Gangoil*, Christmas enters Catherine Carmichael’s story as a way of marking time and because key events occur around this season. “The Two Heroines” begins in the Christmas season and ends at a dinner on Christmas day. The key events, though, are little influenced by the holiday except as it demands family and friends get together.

Directly after the above dismaying remarks, *Harry Heathcote* is the story Trollope cites or describes as from the point of view of Australian weather an ironic Christmas story: “Christmas at the antipodes is of course midsummer.” and it has been, somewhat ingeniously (I think), compared to Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (Armanick). “The Telegraph Girl” also does not appear in the Trollope Society volume though it was first published in *Good Cheer* as the Christmas number of *Good Words* regularly called itself (*Later Short Stories* 594).

That Trollope was sincere in his objections may be seen in two of the explicitly three Christmas stories he did manage to churn out. Perhaps his most popular visibly Christmas story ends when our central

married couple manages to arrive at the family homestead just in time. The subtext of “Christmas at Thompson Hall” is that the last place the husband wants to show up at is the Thompson family hall at Stratford-le-Bow since Mr. Charles Brown has been a failure in life by any measure: he has no occupation, no children, and passes for a complaining invalid whom Mrs. Mary Brown (his Juno of a wife) spends her life catering to, or, as we discover in this story, mollycoddling and managing.

Mary’s many day and hour ordeal of hilarious or miserable (depending on your point of view) comic anguish is occasioned by her mistaking another man for her husband and just swathing this strange man’s throat (while he’s sleeping in his bed) with a burning hot mustard compound and leaving it there all night. Mr. Brown had again been protesting against this trip and croaked so piteously that he could not take another step because his throat was so sore, and he was so cold that in the middle of the night in a vast French hotel, she had gone in search of some medication but because money is not exactly something that does not matter to this couple, did not tip the French servant who had supplied the stuff. Since she now dares not consult said servant, she gets herself lost in the cold labyrinthine hotel twice: first in applying the compound because she thinks she is in the intimacy of her bedroom with her relaxed sleeping husband, and second, after realizing her mistake, she tries and fails to relocate the unknown man because of the dark twisting and turning stairways and corridors. She finally finds her way back to her and her husband’s room, but in the morning her unconscious revenge on the wrong man backfires on her very loudly in the form of this indignant man in much pain and very angry. For once tactful lies just won’t do. “Christmas at Thompson Hall” is the story of an anxiety-ridden attempt to get to a family celebration after years of estrangement which, understandably, at least one of the participants does not want to participate in (*Later Short Stories*, 263-296).

The vexed events leading up to “Christmas Day at Kirby Cottage,” a second story on this theme of the realities of family get-togethers and required happy cheer are prompted when Maurice Archer, our tactless hero, refuses to placate our heroine, Isabel Lownd by pretending that much of the Christmas doings he has to go through each year, are not “a bore.” As the tale proceeds, we find he is not alone in this feeling; his transgression has been in refusing to play along, for the sake of those adults and children capable of this kind of manufactured or genuinely felt enjoyment, even though (I quote Trollope from this story) “from year to year somewhat disappointed.” One example of not so enthusiastic endurance whom Maurice should have taken note of is our heroine’s clerical father who after “preach[ing], no doubt, an appropriate sermon, would then eat his own beef and pudding with his ordinary appetite, and would afterwards, if allowed to do so, sink into his arm-chair behind his book, -- and then, for him, Christmas would be over” (*Later Short Stories*, 236-262),

What’s a commercial writer to do? Every year yet another one expected! Indeed, wanted or needed? Well, between August 1861 and March 1862 Trollope travelled in and around North America during the first phase of the American civil war. He began in Boston and spent much of his time in the pro-Union Northern states and extended himself up into Canada because he was known to be pro-Union, and anti-slavery (which is not at all the same state of mind as someone who was an abolitionist). But he also spent considerable time in Washington DC, and visited Shooters Hill, in Alexandria, a Virginia town taken over by the Federal Gov’t -- two blocks from where I have been living for the past 40 years, which is why I mention it.

As important to know for our two remarkable short stories, “The Widow’s Mite” and “The Two Generals,” Anthony also treaded carefully the border states, including what I make out to be a couple of weeks in later January into early February, 1861-62 in slave society enclaves in Kentucky; in Missouri, he visited St Louis and its environs, which, he says, “had none of the aspects of a slave city” though the Missouri is “a slave state.” At the time of Trollope’s being there, although it had seceded, Missouri was

under martial law under the control of the Unionist General Halleck. As for Kentucky, the setting of “The Two Generals,” Trollope tells us, though no state government had been able to secede, the place was deeply divided, known for having families split into opposite sides (as being “literally a brothers’ war). I add Kentucky had substantial industry and railroads (which our characters travel on), bordered on the Ohio River, which Trollope visits, a conduit, which could be used and was to block troops from either side. Lincoln’s most famous statement about this region remains “I hope to have God on my side, but I must have Kentucky (McPherson 284-97, Trollope’s *North America*, 374-88).”

It is not true, as the editor-writers of 1951 introduction to the New York Knopf edition of *North America* write, that the Civil War is a minor topic in Trollope’s book. It is a continuing and at times over-riding concern (as one might expect from such a politically alert writer and thinker). The subject takes over the introduction, two long internal chapters, stretches of other chapters and part of the book’s conclusion. Out of what Trollope saw and thought about, he wrote and delivered publicly (as lectures) much non-fiction on the war beyond this travel book and two sincerely felt Christmas war stories.

There’s nothing like a war to give a Christmas story a depth of emotion. Famously to American and women readers, the first sentence of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women* is “Christmas won’t be Christmas without any presents,” grumbled Jo [March], lying on the rug. ‘It’s so dreadful to be poor, sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress ... (Alcott). The context for “The Widow’s Mite” is the Lancashire cotton famine, the devastating poverty experienced by the Lancashire cotton workers and their families caused by the blockade and war which prevented the harvesting and shipping of cotton to British mills across the north. I’ve included URLs in my notes (see my website) to some harrowing matter Trollope expects us to be aware of; heart-breaking at the same time inspiring because the English workers persisted in identifying with the enslaved workers and siding with the Northern Union Federal government. “The Widow’s Mite” is a conditions of war story – like what makes some of us incessantly re-watch *Foyle’s War*.

As our story opens, it is the feeling of some of English characters that people ought to have a decent dinner on Christmas day, some warmth, something to feel hopeful about that gives rise to the action of the story. What shall this middle-class clerical family do, if anything, to help the Lancashire cotton workers of the area? Is it in good taste for the family to have an expensive wedding and the bride a luxurious dress when all around them many are starving.

The story's title alludes to Mark 12:42-44: "And there came a certain poor widow, and she threw in two mites, which make a farthing. And [Jesus] called unto him his disciples, and saith unto them, ‘Verily I say unto you, that this poor widow hath cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury: For all they did cast in of their abundance; but she of her want cast in all that she had, even all her living.’”

Our heroine, Nora Field, wants to help her uncle, the Rev. Mr. Granger, gather money to feed the workers, but she feels it’s not enough to give out of her superfluity; she wants to give up something she will miss. It may seem odd that she finds this difficult to do – but she is middle class, gentry –and that she cannot pull this off is the point of the story. The central action (an inward one which becomes outward) is Nora decides is she will have a plain wedding so she can give the money she was going to use to buy and make herself expensive finery to her uncle for the use of the cotton mill workers. She refuses to allow Frederick F Frew, her American husband-to-be to pay for the finery, which he could do.

The story is set in time and place very explicitly and uses the usual multi-perspective political, economic and social points of view typical of Trollope, and a religious one not so typical. There are several uses of Biblical allusive language. And as usual Trollope's characters' attitudes reflect what cultural group they grew up in and their particular situation in life at the moment. Early on Nora's cousin, Charles, who is insulated somewhat at Oxford, suggests all the people in England, Scotland, and Ireland should simply not eat a Christmas dinner, take all the money saved, and hand that out. He is only momentarily non-plussed when he is told by his brother Bob, who works in a merchant's house in Liverpool, the Irish don't have a Christmas meal to give away: "They never have any in Ireland, Bob." Bob denies this: "They do have Christmas dinners in Ireland. It's pretty nearly the only day they do." (397-98). Ever theoretical, later in the story, Charley takes Nora to task for not spending money on finery, for in her efforts to help the cotton workers she will leave those who make clothes without work: "Charley condemned [Nora] altogether, pointing out that it was bad policy to feed the cotton spinners at the expense of the milliners" (415).

Frederick F. Frew is a strong Democrat (that's his party), a Pennsylvania businessman "for the war" (that means secession), who hates the Republicans and England, so wanted England to come in on the side of the confederacy; his party affiliation and the Liverpool basis of his fortune also suggest he is pro-slavery. Among his various characteristics, "kindly-hearted, capable of generosity," we are told "he was hard, keen in his intelligence" and "thin and meagre in his aspirations" (399). Fred accuses Nora and these charity-givers of acting the way they do in order to make themselves feel good in comparison to others and, what's more, of unnatural (in modern parlance) "political correctness:" instead of the Bible he draws his analogy this way: look "how dogs let other dogs starve and therefore we but follow nature if we do like to other people" Trollope is writing heavy ironic caricature when he has Fred conclude: "the widow would have done better to have invested her small capital in some useful trade" (415). We are told Nora is a Unionist, and strong against the South, reluctant to give up her Englishness. Yet she is prepared to marry Frederick. There is a note of doubt about the coming happiness of Nora in her "future home" in Philadelphia (400, 407).

There is then a very complicated argument about the results of recent US elections and the war which we have not time to go into here; suffice to say the "what if" arguments about what could put an end to the war (and bring American cotton to English ports) is inconclusive. Norah then decides she wants to postpone the wedding unless Fred agrees to have a plain one. He does not take her seriously (404-6). The text reverts to equally painstaking arguments over how Nora or anyone in their world could imitate the widow. The characters go on about this at the same time as they argue that Nora is obligated to wear finery for the sake of those who would be disappointed of their "rights" to wear finery. Nora at last breaks out and says she feels "like a rat" by going away from England at this time, but if he won't postpone, and "she must be a rat ... I won't be a rat in a white silk gown" (414).

My problem with this text is to those who starve or are homeless, cold, in the dark, the whole debate is blindly class-oriented and egocentric: Nora and all those who take her seriously or debate with her are showing more interest in her or their feelings than in giving to those who are in need. There is no question she should ever have to do without what she wears, a homely "customary thick woollen shawl," perhaps one of those we are told "her aunt toils unceasingly at" (406). In his narrator's comment Trollope seems to want us to see Nora genuinely has an active conscience, and she deals with it by this "ostentatious act" and the accusation the story makes that she is a hypocrite would make her in her mind more like the widow because she is hurting more (407).

The story asks the question, what is charity and what is the best way to go about it? What are its motives? I would liken Nora to the person in a pair of very fancy boots walking in the snow who sees someone with nothing on his feet and wants to give up her boots to the other person in order that she may feel the snow, but alas all the while she knows that she has a pair of ordinary shoes in her bag. The sincere Nora discovers by walking through the snow shoeless she is unable to make herself feel good.

There's an anti-materialism figured forth for us in the closing morning wedding breakfast scene – everyone is dressed plainly and for warmth (418). Nora finds that she didn't need the finery. Trollope is implying such feelings are fleeting at best because luxurious goods are not what make us happy. For me its absence feels not only unimportant but adds to the beauty of the moment. I read the story in our contemporary context as against turning something privately meaningful into an occasion for conspicuous consumption.

The story ends with a wry ironic dialogue. Nora's uncle, our Rev. Mr. Granger, has gotten her aunt, his wife, to give her coals to the poor to help them keep warm. We are given to understand it's kind of cold in that wedding-breakfast room: 'I say, isn't it cold,' said Bob.'" Later when all the company are gone, and Mr. and Mrs. Granger are alone, the Reverend offers the idea that it might be that even if the widow had "threw in all she had ... who can say she suffered in consequence? It is my belief that all that is given in a right spirit, comes back instantly in this world with interest.' 'I wish my coals would come back,' said Mrs. Granger. 'Perhaps you have not given them in a right spirit, my dear.'" (*Early Short Stories*, 397-419)

Trollope's "Two Generals" may not resonate with readers today even with the uncomfortable ironies we find in "The Widow's Mite." By setting the story in Kentucky, Trollope signaled to his readers, the story was not meant to comfort us; I suggest floating above its issues with a feigned disinterest in this Christmas of 2022 may be also be felt as not allowable. Trollope begins by telling us our perspective is to be that of Christmas 1863 ("CHRISTMAS of 1860 is now three years past"), that while the first stage of the war where our story begins seemed "bloodless," "No one can now laugh:" "Never have the shores of any stream been so bathed in blood" as have those of the American border states, in which he includes Virginia. Perhaps the US Civil War in 1863 may be compared to World War II in the UK in 1943-44, just before or past some crucial turning points.

"The Two Generals" centers on a continuously bruising seemingly irretrievable conflict between two brothers, Tom, a confederate general, and slave-owner; and Frank, a Unionist general who is a product of West Point. Also on Major Reckenthorpe, in the story an old man, a lawyer, a Kentucky senator, duellist, and in the story a slave-owner who voted for the abolition of slavery in Kentucky, and worked at first to stop secession and (becoming Governor) later changed his mind. It's important to know this character is even closely based on a real man with some importance and power, whom Trollope met in Washington, D.C., John J. Crittenden (1787-1863). Trollope remarks elsewhere that he knows Crittenden's deepest sympathies were with the confederacy despite the gestures of compromise (Thompson as quoted in Sutherland, Mullen & Munson). Crittenden's two sons (while changed in many details in Trollope's story) did indeed fight on opposite sides of the Civil War, Thomas (renamed Frank) as a general in the US army, and George (renamed Tom) as a general in the confederate army.

Tom and Frank are rivals for the love of Mrs. Reckenthorpe's near niece, Ada Forster, an orphan, a strong abolitionist, brought up and come from Maine (which by 1851, had a strict prohibitionist law, mentioned by Trollope). We are asked to believe Ada has, nevertheless, chosen the pro-slavery Tom because his softer manners and courting ways appealed to her. I find it significant that in both stories Trollope's heroine prefers the pro-confederacy man while herself an abolitionist or at least against secession.

On that first Christmas the brothers quarrel ferociously, and Tom vows, if they ever meet on the battlefield, to shoot down Frank "as a renegade," a traitor to his country (meaning Kentucky). A little later in conversation with the father and Ada, Tom says of course he did not mean it, but he said it. On the second Christmas, Frank, as the Union soldier, not a rebel, refuses to promise not to turn Tom in (who has come into the house briefly and now remains nearby), given Tom's history fighting for the Confederacy. Tom may also be modeled on the confederate general, J.E.B. Stuart. Still, we see now and again the two brothers give way to one another; early on, Tom leaves the house as his father and brother oppose secession; later on, Frank leaves the house to allow Tom time and a place to be with Ada.

Between Christmases, Trollope's narrator keeps the context of the war before us. He tells of real battles and behaviors, presents some arguments which sympathize with the confederacy, and yet shows awareness of the confederacy's inexorable drive to expand slavery far south and west. Trollope also includes grating gratuitous racism, such as when he tells us that the enslaved people in the house prefer the confederate Tom to the unionist Frank and cater to Tom. Ada is not to be deterred despite the threat of confiscation of the property of all those who fought for the Confederacy and her own cutting reference to what Tom is doing to destroy all in his path. There is the old man's faltering change of heart ("the Yankees [just] too bitter for him"), and death.

The central event of the story is archetypal, something found in Arthurian romances (and Louisa May Alcott's civil war short story, "My Contraband") (1). In the fall of the third year, these rival brothers meet on the battlefield. Tom has been cut off from his troops, is unhorsed, no weapon but a pistol, and finds himself confronted by Frank, who has his pistol raised, his finger on the trigger. They step back, but all alert calmness has vanished. Frank gives Tom a chance to run, but, as Tom is about to turn, Tom is shot (by someone else) in the leg. Three days later Tom's leg is amputated between his knee and his hip. He is permanently disabled. There is a period of togetherness between the two brothers, and with Frank acting on behalf of Tom, Tom is transferred to a prisoner of war camp, but it takes more than two months to affect an exchange of prisoners, so that Tom returns home to Kentucky in the bitter dark winter. No mention of Christmas now. Ada is all loving loyalty, and we are told "they were married in May, though the din of war was going on around them on every side"

Trollope's artistry in this story is unlike what we are used to or come to expect. He is not interested in delving deeply the psyches of his characters, and it is hard to tell the two brothers apart; Trollope has rather resorted to a kind of allegory. In *North America* he explains at length his view "that slavery in its various bearings has been the single and necessary cause of the war" (*NA*, 341-350), and shows an awareness of how interwoven slavery was into the economic fabric of US society as far as New England and citified northern businessmen (like Frederick F Frew). In the non-fiction about the war, he worries over what he sees happening in places where martial law has taken over:

"[W]hile I was there eight men were condemned to be shot for destroying railway bridges. 'But will they be shot?' I asked of one of the officers. 'Oh, yes. It will be done quietly and no one will know anything about it. We shall get used to that kind of thing presently' ... [Trollope comments] the winning

of liberty is long and tedious, but the losing it is a downhill easy journey” (NA 391).

In the closing peroration to “The Two Generals” Trollope writes: “the carnage of their battles, and the hatreds of their civil contests, are terrible to us,” but he acknowledges there that nothing less could’ve eradicated slavery, “to abolish which no human power seemed to be sufficient” (*Early Short Stories*, 420-439).

Other Victorian writers spoke out vehemently against the meretricious demands of the Christmas market. Among them is Wilkie Collins from whose letters people cite 11 different instances against “dreadful Christmas literature,” “Christmas cards,” and “visits to pay and every other social nuisance.” He coupled his complaints with comments about how much money there was to be made by publishing a story around Christmas time as an explanation for why there was so much of it: “Dickens told a friend of mine, that he had made *four thousand guineas* (that’s italicized) by his last year’s Christmas book.” So, says Collins, he too wrote many, but he is also on record as keeping Christmas in this way: “Don’t talk about having no home to go to – you know you are at home here. Come and eat your Christmas dinner with us – you will find your knife, fork, plate and chair all ready for you. Time six o’clock. Mind you come on Christmas Day” (2). When Trollope thought he did have themes worthy of Christmas, he could write stories of serious comedy and tragedy which are (alas) still relevant to us today.

Note:

1 It is a common archetypal motif in Arthurian tales for two brothers or a father and son to encounter one another on the battlefield. Balan and Balin are an idealized instance of this in Malory. Shakespeare uses this paradigm to great effect in the Henry VI plays

2 See online “Wilkie at Christmas,” compiled by Paul Lewis:
<http://www.web40571.clarahost.co.uk/wilkie/christmas.htm>

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_J._Crittenden

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Leonidas_Crittenden

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_B._Crittenden