

G. M. Harvey

## HEROES IN BARSETSHIRE

Thomas Carlyle expressed his despair at the diminished scope for heroism in *Heroes and Hero-Worship*:

I am well aware that in these days Hero-worship, the thing I call Hero-worship, professes to have gone out, and finally ceased. This, for reasons which it will be worth while some time to inquire into, is an age that as it were denies the existence of great men; denies the desirableness of great men.<sup>1</sup>

He thought that this decline had its roots in the spread of democracy, (the House of Commons he labelled a "talking-shop"), the growth of commercial enterprise, (the "Gospel of Mammon"), and Evangelical bigotry. However, his pessimism did not preclude a vision of hope for the future:

But I liken common languid Times, with their unbelief, distress, perplexity, with their languid doubting characters and embarrassed circumstances, impotently crumbling down into ever worse distress towards final ruin;—all this I liken to dry dead fuel, waiting for the lightning out of Heaven that shall kindle it. (20)

Although very different in style and range, Carlyle shared this pessimism about the modern world with the novelist, Anthony Trollope. Indeed, early in his career Trollope had tried to emulate Carlyle's *Later-Day Pamphlets* in *The New Zealander*, and although, like many of his friends, he thought some of Carlyle's ideas quite mad, the two men already had a healthy respect for each other when they met for the first time in 1861, at the home of George Henry Lewes and George Eliot.

Trollope shared Carlyle's puritan contempt for the modern "Vanity Fair" which the Victorians were creating, and believed with him that moral values were the only values; but he did not share Carlyle's faith in the distant approach of the spiritual "lightning". This moral clear-sightedness and social realism has been invaluable to historians of the nineteenth century, like D. C. Somervell, for instance, who refers in these terms to the *Chronicles of Barsetshire*:

Of all Victorian novelists Anthony Trollope has come to be recognized as the most faithful recorder of ordinary life and manners.<sup>2</sup>

With the growth of materialism and bureaucracy in the prosperous middle years of the century, Trollope, like Carlyle, saw in the increasing power of the commercial ethic, the development of a world in which moral heroism was becoming rare. An important aspect of his realism is his steady refusal to admit heroes or the heroic into his fiction, and he makes an interesting defence of this practice in Chapter XXXV of *The Eustace Diamonds*. However, in *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, perhaps his best-known novel, and the one that made him the most popular writer of the 1860s, he explores the theme of heroism most fully.

The presence in *The Last Chronicle* of three idealistic rebels in conflict with major Victorian institutions makes the kind of moral generalization we find in the inclusion of three bereaved sons in *Hamlet*, or two betrayed old men in *King Lear*; and in his *Autobiography* Trollope gives us an insight into the formal way he accommodated a panoramic novel like *The Last Chronicle*, with its multitude of diverse characters, multiple stories, and richly contrasted milieux, to his moral vision:

Though [the writer's] story should be all one, yet it may have many parts. Though the plot itself may require but few characters, it may be so enlarged as to find its full development in many. There may be subsidiary plots, which shall all tend to the elucidation of the main story, and which will take their places as part of one and the same work. . . .<sup>3</sup>

For Trollope the "story" has an integrating power, bringing plots and characters into significant relation, and the subsidiary plots thus form balanced compositional centres in the novel, each embodying an aspect of its central theme. In this way the reader is encouraged to see "round" the subject as a static, as well as organic, composition, and to perceive the story, finally, as a moral entity.

There are a number of plots competing for the reader's attention in *The Last Chronicle*. There is the poverty-stricken curate, Mr. Crawley, suffering under the accusation of having stolen a cheque from Lord Lufton's man of business, and the bishop's attempts to prevent him preaching; there is the attendant story of his daughter Grace's love for Major Grantly, the widowed son of the archdeacon of the diocese; the story of John Eames's perpetual courtship of Lily Dale, and the adventures of the artist, Conway Dalrymple, in London. These constitute moral centres in the novel, which are offered for the reader to compare and judge.

The central characters, Mr. Crawley and John Eames, consistently advance the theme of the novel as each attempts, in his own way, to become a hero. The complete personal and social contrast between the rusty, ascetic curate, and the complacent, urbane civil servant, who never meet in the novel, draws attention to their parallel stories.

At the end of the book Trollope makes it plain that it was not his intention to write "an epic about clergymen". Had this been his aim he would have taken "St. Paul for [his] model" (II, 452).<sup>4</sup> The reference to St. Paul is instructive, for in his despairing battles with poverty, the law and the church, this is the pattern of heroic martyrdom that Mr. Crawley proposes to himself. His reading of the Greek heroes, the *Seven Against Thebes*, and *Samson Agonistes*, and his identification with the great deliverer, "Eyeless in Gaza, at the mill with slaves" (II, 232), give him the inspiration he needs to prosecute a satisfying victory over the timid bishop and his termagant wife. His proud battle for his pulpit makes the curate a popular hero in Bassetshire, but what spoils his claim to epic heroism is the rooted egoism that makes the image of a lonely martyr attractive to him.

In London, John Eames views himself explicitly as a romantic hero because of his constancy to Lily Dale, and this is given spurious substance by the myths current in the Income-tax Office, about his wealth and physical prowess, but in the course of the novel his romantic dreams crumble, and he is finally trapped into a shady intrigue by an aggressive London girl.

Clearly there is a difference between the epic heroes, from whom Mr. Crawley draws his strength, and the potential heroes of *The Last Chronicle*. Since Trollope believed, with Carlyle, that society no longer offered the opportunity for heroism on a meaningful scale, instead of the hero mirroring and amplifying the aspirations of his society, in Trollope's novel the potential hero battles against its collective will, represented by its institutions, its pressure groups and unwritten codes. Rebellion is one of the dominant answering situations which bind the story.

Trollope's attack on the bulwarks of the Victorian establishment, the church, the law, and the civil service, is severe. Like Dickens, who satirized the civil service in the Circumlocution Office in *Little Dorrit*, Trollope saw these structures, in the 1850s and 1860s, in the process of freezing into rigid, impersonal bureaucracies. His criticism of the church is directed at the anomalous situation where political appointees like Proudie are made bishops; a man like Mark Robarts spends all his time lounging about his friend Lord Lufton's stables; and Thumb'e and Quiverful run errands for the bishop's wife; while

able men like Mr. Crawley languish in the obscure poverty of a perpetual curacy without enough income to support the dignity of their profession.

The worldly and political nature of clerical life is ironically exposed by the deep integrity of the curate's revolt. Belief in the dignity of the priesthood in which he serves dictates his cumulative battles with the rural dean and the bishop, and as sides are taken decisively the schism in the diocese widens, and the covert battle between the palace and the Framley set, led by Lady Lufton, the "opposition bishop", moves into the open.

While the church in Barssetshire is ruled by a weak, hen-pecked bishop, the Income-tax Office in London is controlled by an arrogant bully, Sir Raffle Buffle. Trollope draws on his experiences in the Post Office to bring to life the atmosphere of daily hypocrisies and petty jealousies which are focussed in the relation between Sir Raffle and his private secretary. Eames resents his sycophantic position; he cannot be bothered to extinguish his cigars and preserve the insidious illusion of industry or the veneer of obsequiousness that Sir Raffle's ego demands. The superbly farcical scene of rebellion, where he counterbluffs his superior by replacing for a day his normal jaunty air with a wan mask and sombre dress, in order to get leave of absence to aid Mr. Crawley, is beautifully done, and makes a fine parallel with Mr. Crawley's climactic interview at the palace.

The dominant irony of the scenes of rebellion is that the true rebel against the spirit and structure of the institution being threatened is, in each case, not the obvious revolutionary, but its figurehead. His superiors are aware that Sir Raffle Buffle is abusing his authority to bolster his ego; and the "inhibition" that Mrs. Proudie makes her husband send Mr. Crawley is strictly illegal, giving the curate an opportunity to lecture his bishop on the distinction between "criminal" and ecclesiastical law. Ironically, the destructive radical is not the rebellious, down-at-heel curate, but the bishop's wife. Mr. Crawley's political instinct quickly senses the source of diocesan power, and his challenging "Peace woman" brings the bishop to his feet in admiration.

While there is a similarity of situation, there is a difference of moral emphasis in these balanced scenes. It lies not only in the fact that Eames attacks from a position of strength, while the curate has to construct his rebellion from a point of extreme political weakness, but that the curate's revolt is thoroughly conservative and sincere while Eames's against Sir Raffle Buffle is different only in degree from his superior's egomania.

The heroes fail, and in similar ways. Egoism is the root of moral failure in *The Last Chronicle*, and it is the function of the minor figures to

throw light on the moral ambivalence of the protagonists. Both are isolated men: Mr. Crawley's search for sympathy among the labourers of Hoggie End is not in keeping with heroic dignity, any more than Johnny Eames's soliciting support from his rich patroness, old Lady Julia de Guest. The curate's final gesture of relinquishing his church is the deliberate choice of an unnecessary martyrdom. Egoism makes Mr. Crawley's best actions perverse, and this is something he is partly aware of. The unreflecting egoist, John Eames, also fails through succumbing to his own myth-making, and his vaunted constancy in love is sacrificed to languid evenings in the dimly-lit rooms of Porchester Terrace.

The parallel, though discrete and separate development of their stories makes a dominant structural irony that serves the function of moral emphasis, when the Wheel of Fortune turns for both men, as in a Morality play. At the conclusion we leave the romantic hero, again rejected by Lily Dale after his "epic" journey abroad in pursuit of the dean, weeping in mortification over a rail in a deserted London street. For Mr. Crawley, however, life reveals a different solution. His battles arise partly from thwarted ambition, and his assimilation at the end of the novel from the stylised posture of the radical defender of the poor to the elevated status of a vicar is appropriate and embarrassingly human, and testifies to the power of social claims.

However, this is only one of a number of interlocking stories that advance the central theme of the novel. Like Eames, Major Grantly fails to achieve heroic stature because he succumbs to social pressure; not to the materialism of the archdeacon, or even the approbation of his class, but to the subtle pressure of the women, who constitute such a revolutionary and yet healing force in Trollope's Victorian world. They view Lily Dale's refusal of John Eames and the archdeacon's war with his son as a threat to the feminine code of romantic love, which in turn masks a hard-headed devotion to the security of marriage. As Eames allows the women to plead his cause with Lily, so they try to make Major Grantly a sacrificial hero by feeding his filial rebellion. The schoolmistress, Miss Prettyman, reads the staid Major's vacillation in his face and manages to convince him, not without some pangs of conscience, that the way of romantic sacrifice is magnificent. The collective masculine will of his society is equally strong, however. He has heard the banter at his Silverbridge club and wants to avoid the stigma of the gaol.

This equivocation is resolved in a parallel scene in Silverbridge High Street, in a meeting with the subversive millionairess, Mrs. Thorne. Her conversation, with its aggressive, debunking quality, makes a neat and human

contrast with the careful phrases of the spinster. Mrs. Thorne's healthy disrespect for the claims of wealth and rank, her contemptuous dismissal of the affair of the "trumpery cheque", and the unbounded delight in romance, bring Major Grantly to the point of reluctant decision.

One function of these interwoven stories is to create a pattern of moral correspondence in the reader's mind, sometimes through juxtaposition. The meeting of Eames and Grantly on the railway train down to Guestwick, both journeying to propose to their respective young ladies, is a means of transition to Barsetshire, but it is also a meeting of stories which makes the moral pattern. Trollope's plots are really different versions of the same human tale, and here these stories, which have run parallel, meet, as they are designed to do. The author appeals to the "intelligent reader" to make the moral connection, and he provides a reading direction in the title to Chapter XXVII, "A Hero at Home".

The deft juxtaposition of the points of view of the two men in the railway carriage, each pretending to read and thinking instead of the task ahead, probes their claims to romantic heroism. The ironic tone of the author's voice alerts the reader to the fact that Eames is a little too self-conscious and tired of his fruitless role; and Trollope's ironic deflation extends to the major, who is not relishing this "task before him" (I, 281). As the reader knows, just as Eames's trip is due to the taunting of his friend, Dalrymple, Major Grantly's journey is the result of the social skill of the Barsetshire ladies. Moreover, once at Allington, like the perversity of John Eames and Lily Dale, Grantly's subsequent devotion to Grace is prompted by her generous refusal of him. As Trollope comments sardonically:

Half at least of the noble deeds done in this world are due to emulation, rather than to the native nobility of the actors (I, 314).

What the social weight of the novel's panorama tends to obscure, it is the function of this juxtaposition of stories to reveal.

In London a further minor parallel is made between the romantic hero, John Eames, and the "artist-hero", Conway Dalrymple. In Barsetshire the illusory claims of epic and romantic heroism are soon discredited. They cannot flourish in a healthy moral climate; but in London people live in a fantasy world spun out of the needs of the ego. Here is found the kind of insanity that sets up the unknown artist as a hero figure with the task of deifying on canvas the leaders of the commercial world. Trying to make a misplaced heroic assault on this society, the two young innocents are ensnared by the

aspiring rich, especially the women, who unlike their Barseshire counterparts are destructively neurotic. It is a measure of the moral distinction that Trollope makes between the two young men that Dalrymple finally sickens of the theatrical and shallow Mrs. Dobbs Broughton, while Eames, initially the more critical of the Broughton set, is beguiled by the wily Madalina Demolines and her mother, and in the end only escapes them by calling a policeman.

*The Last Chronicle* begins, for fourteen chapters, as if it were a novel about Mr. Crawley and the missing cheque. Rumour spreads throughout the county and all Barseshire is alive with the interest of scandal. Then the story moves abruptly to London, and we rarely return to Mr. Crawley's story with the same concentration. It takes its place in the rotation of the plots, and the great pattern of shifting contrasts that gives *The Last Chronicle* its social richness and moral subtlety.

The reader who desires the intensity of tragedy may be disappointed, but the disappointment is functional, and its aim is realism. The obscure country curate cannot become a tragic St. Paul figure in the modern world. His story has to be placed in perspective by the wider and more tarnished world of the metropolis, and this means that it is swallowed up and forgotten in the bustle of its commercial concerns. Further, the theme of the failure of moral heroism has to be developed without one engrossing figure.

London is clearly segregated from Barseshire, and this is part of the meaning of the novel, for they constitute separate areas of moral experience. In *The Last Chronicle*, however, Trollope sees the values of the metropolis beginning to impinge on Barseshire life, and he insinuates into the narrative, quietly and without strain, several links between them. The archdeacon extends his Plumstead fields with income from his London property; his son, Charles, preaches at a famous metropolitan church; old Lady Julie de Guests's money is handled by a man in the city; Mrs. Thorne's ointment millions permit her an ostentatious house in a fashionable London square; and John Eames employs his legacy to prosper in the civil service. In Barchester, the palace is invaded by evangelical Londoners, and the ancient cathedral Close is beginning to feel the desecrating and levelling hands of the hated Ecclesiastical Commission, as the houses are leased out, in the words of the angry archdeacon, "to tallow-chandlers and retired brewers" (II, 36). London values are extended as the metropolis increasingly becomes the source of Barseshire wealth and power.

Part of the contrast between the two worlds is made in terms of character and situation, and the link is made, technically, through the overlapping of

scenes in time, which draw them to the surface of the reader's moral attention. As Eames's trip to Barsestshire overlaps with Mr. Crawley's visit to London, thematically, the potential hero of Barsestshire is being tested by the hard-headed reality of the city, while the romantic hero of the metropolis is tested by the moral context of the country. The setting of Eames's moral crisis at Allington is quietly emblematic. The frosted garden of the Small House makes an image of the dead relation with Lily which he refuses to recognize, and it points up the irony of his London associations. He has forgotten the country seasons and expects roses, and croquet in progress on the lawn.

The strength and tact with which Lily Dale rejects her chance to avoid the blight of Victorian spinsterhood means that Allington comes to stand in the novel as an emblem of Barsestshire's power of moral discrimination, of even too self-conscious moral scrutiny. John Eames returns with the knowledge that he is "vain, and foolish, and unsteady" (I, 372), but the unreal atmosphere of London quickly absorbs him again, and persuades him to turn failure into romantic martyrdom on an heroic scale, with Miss Demolines.

Similarly, London is an area of moral testing for the country figures. Absent-minded and bewildered, Mr. Crawley is on a painful quest for the truth of his moral condition, and in baring his heart to the kindly but slightly vulgar Mr. Toogood, the fastidious curate undergoes a penitential exercise in humility. That this hard-nosed city lawyer is completely convinced by his improbable tale is further vindication of Mr. Crawley's integrity.

The most important thematic effect of the rotation of the several plots of *The Last Chronicle* is the undercutting of one character's story by the next. John Eames's shallow heroics are set beside the greater generosity of Major Grantly, and their rebellions are in turn undercut by the power and tenacity of Mr. Crawley's magnificent revolt against the bishop. It is a complex moral design, which finally reveals the complete moral stature of the protagonists, and the reader discovers that Mr. Crawley's revolutionary fervour and intellectual arrogance overlie an innate conservatism, and humility of almost heroic proportion.

When Mr. Toogood and Major Grantly bring news that the dean's wife has revealed the origin of the cheque, and that he will not have to stand trial, the curate astounds them by calmly remarking that in his clearer moments he had known all along where it came from. What his pride and jealousy has concealed is that he really does believe Dean Arabin is a better man than himself, and that he was too humble to contradict a second time the considered statement of his friend. When Major Grantly exclaims, "I call that man a



hero" (II, 354), it is difficult not to agree. But it is a moral heroism that is severely qualified by the novel as a whole, and by Mr. Crawley's assimilation at its end into the easier conventions of polite clerical society.

This process of deferred judgment means that all the claimants to moral heroism in *The Last Chronicle* present different versions of moral failure when finally set beside the humility and graciousness of the quiet revolutionary, old Mr. Harding. It is central to the theme of the novel that this meek, almost feminine old man emerges as its most consistent rebel and only moral hero. The irony surfaces late in the book, deliberately concealed by the bustle of its various stories and pressing concerns, all of which are finally brought to stand beside and be judged by the story of Mr. Harding.

The aged Precentor of the cathedral possesses the quality of sympathy, which is a healing force in Trollope's tarnished world. As in *The Warden*, when he battled successfully with his son-in-law, the powerful archdeacon, over the hospital; and in *Barchester Towers*, when he renounced the deanery in favour of Arabin, he is still a tenacious, though sweet-tempered rebel.

In *The Last Chronicle* he enjoys a mild triumph over the worldly aspirations of his daughter for her son, Major Grantly. He could not approve of her other children's fine marriages, but he thinks highly of Grace Crawley, and vigorously champions her father in opposition to the archdeacon. He is one of the few clergymen who cannot believe the curate guilty. He stoutly affirms his innocence to the enquiring Mr. Toogood, and his human sympathy prompts the letter to his daughter, Eleanor, which discloses the source of the cheque.

The man who can no longer struggle the few daily yards to the door of his beloved cathedral is the novel's most powerful moral figure, for in addition to his persistent revolt against worldly values, he has the capacity for untrumpeted martyrdom. Even on his death-bed his moral influence on the bluff archdeacon is such that St. Ewold's vicarage is promised for Mr. Crawley with a squeeze of the hand, and after his death his healing power is still at work in the life of the diocese. One of the few people to mourn Mrs. Proudie's sudden death, Mr. Harding earns the gratitude of the bishop, and his presence at the old man's funeral is accepted by the emotional archdeacon as an overture of peace, and he pledges new harmony in the diocese.

Archdeacon Grantly is profoundly moved, and his conscience stirred, by the death of his old friend. Pacing before the deanery fire he has a rare moral insight and there bursts from him the unexpected assertion that the meek old man, whom he had often scorned, had "all the spirit of a hero" (II, 421). Coming from such a surprising quarter this judgment gains emphasis, but it

also has all the weight of the novel's structure behind it. Trollope places this insight unremarked, at the centre of a number of interlocking stories, and allows it to emerge late in the novel with the maximum ironic effect. The true revolutionary in an increasingly materialistic and self-absorbed society is the conservative, and a man with no pride. The moral hero of *The Last Chronicle* is the "unheroic" hero.

Part of the background to Trollope's study of the possibility for moral heroism in the modern world is the contrast between past and present. Carlyle's *Past and Present* turns for inspiration to the social values of the middle ages. Trollope's past extends only as far as the England of Jane Austen, and the youth of Mr. Harding. It is evoked in the fine emblematic scene of the reverential drinking of the last of the 1820 port. When the archdeacon makes a bitter contrast between the present and the days when clergymen danced and played cards, despite his instinctive conservatism Mr. Harding's scrupulous conscience forces him to take a radical stance, and to utter a gentle reproof:

"He never thought himself infallible. And do you know, my dear, I am not sure that it isn't all for the best. I sometimes think that some of us were very idle when we were young. I was, I know." (I, 225)

Nevertheless, the drinking of the wine confers an almost sacramental quality upon the past, which is intensified by their sense of its transience.

The corresponding contrapuntal scene in London, at the Dobbs Broughton's dinner-party, is in striking contrast, as we move from the quiet conversation of the clergymen to the forced conviviality and concealed tensions of Bayswater. There is a complete change of tone as Broughton boasts of the price of his '42 Bordeaux with an air of vulgar patronage. For him it represents his commercial acumen and social status. For the two clergymen, the wine is an old friend, and the price is irrelevant. Here, in the contrast between Barsetshire and London, the emblematic patterning of past and present is full and complete.

The ending of the era of *The Warden* is realized in the emblematic function of Mr. Harding's violincello. Like Mr. Crawley's books it is an appropriate emblem for the sustaining power of cultural tradition. But its function is also quieter and more personal. What it comes to signify is given in the scenes of finely controlled pathos when the old man visits its case with his tiny granddaughter, Posy. He fails to play it, but she succeeds in getting weird melodies out of its ancient strings. It stands for harmony in personal and moral relations, and the visit leads him to recall the melodies of former

days when, as warden, he played to the fractious bedesmen in the idyllic garden of Hiram's hospital.

The violincello is a fitting emblem for the man who makes harmony in people's lives, and for his times. But the world of *The Last Chronicle* is changing, and with the death of Mr. Harding and the assimilation of Mr. Crawley, Trollope was not merely closing a series of chronicles about a fictitious English county, but charting the narrowing possibilities for moral heroism in the modern world. After Mr. Harding there are no herces in Trollope. His pessimism precluded Carlyle's vision of a new, heroic age.

#### NOTES

1. Thomas Carlyle, *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, London, 1841, p. 19. (All further quotations are from this edition. Subsequent references will appear in the text.)
2. D. C. Somervell, *English Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, London, 1929, p. 167.
3. Anthony Trollope, *An Autobiography*, Oxford (World's Classics), 1939, p. 217. (The World's Classics is selected as being a convenient text.)
4. Anthony Trollope, *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, Oxford (World's Classics), 1967. (This is a 'double volume' edition, with an Introduction by the late Bradford A. Booth. All further quotations are from this edition. Subsequent references will appear in the text, and indicate the volume.)