

## Anthony Trollope's Secret Scottish Life

When Hodder & Stoughton commissioned *The Love Child* – I little realised that this would involve months of detective work along Scotland's wild west coast. I had decided to set the story in Castle Wemyss home of the Burns, later the Lords Inverclyde, Chairmen and co-financiers of the Cunard Line, for my husband's great-great-grandfather had known Trollope in the late 1870s while employed as the Burns' Yachtmaster; indeed it was in researching his family history that we first learned of the Trollope/Burns connection. So I invented an inherited portrait of a beautiful girl, who would prove the inspiration for Lizzie Eustace, Trollope's most exciting heroine. That my leading character Harriet should have a nose like a trufflehound, nagging me to research long after all plot and background needs had been served, indeed after the book itself had been submitted, is yet another twist in the curious relationship of character and novelist, one Trollope himself would have appreciated.

According to CP Snow, '*There weren't, and aren't any secrets about the routine of (Trollope's) life.*' This was written before Dr Derek Hawes revealed Trollope in 1999 to be a Freemason in Ireland. Anthony Trollope never alluded to his close association with the Burns family in his autobiography and few letters concerning the Burns family have survived. Yet this friendship spanned more than a quarter of a century, between men who were renowned for being meticulous about the details of their routine and business dealings, even by the exacting standards of the time. I believe this is exactly what Trollope and George Burns wanted. I also contend that my new evidence of the genesis of this relationship fundamentally changes our reading of '*Barchester Towers.*'

For any writer heaven is an untouched archive. So the Inverclyde Collection in Glasgow's Mitchell Library – has been my demi-paradise, a series of neglected scrapbooks charting the history of this extraordinary family and a century and a half of

entertaining the biggest names of the day. For the extraordinary rise to wealth and influence of these ruthless Glaswegian businessmen is as fascinating as anything Trollope ever conjured up from his imagination.

George Burns (1795 - 1891) was an evangelical Christian on the make at a time of post-war economic expansion and wide-reaching technological innovations. Son of a Church of Scotland minister, he and his brother James set up as G & J Burns & Co. general merchants in the 1820s and were soon running the mails between Greenock, Liverpool, Belfast and Londonderry. It was a licence to print money and soon they were gobbling up competitors. In the 1830s, Samuel Cunard a Boston merchant seeking funding for a mail shipping line between Liverpool and the U.S., visited George Burns having been rejected by both Wall St and the City of London. Within weeks, Burns founded a consortium investing £270,000 – injecting just £10,500 of his own – and by 1839 was installed as the first Chairman of the Cunard Steam Packet Company. With its fully guaranteed Government contracts, the Cunard Line expanded rapidly, Burns dedicating profits from his own Irish mail ships to buying out the consortium and also acquiring the luxurious Castle Wemyss estate on the Firth of Clyde a few miles outside Largs. Ten years later in order to demolish competition, George Burns offered to transport the British Irish mails for nothing, which an astonished Colonel Maberly, Trollope's boss, accepted. Few Scots realise that America's Cunard Line was launched on such Glaswegian chutzpah

Enter wannabe hit novelist and post office official Anthony Trollope, pushing forty with family history of financial ruin. Professor John Sutherland, whose introduction to the Oxford Classics edition of *Barchester Towers* has been such an inspiration, describes Trollope at this time, "***in a condition approaching desperation***", a dark period he suggests, in an otherwise well-documented life. Professor Sutherland writes: "***The period 1853-5 is one of the darkest i.e. of Trollope's life. There survives ... only seven letters for all three years (some of them incomplete and incorrectly***

*dated*". I began to ask myself whether this frustrating and unusual dearth of paperwork might not be unplanned?

In October 1854 Trollope finished *The Warden* and took up his promotion as Surveyor for the Northern District of Ireland. Normally Trollope started a new novel as soon as he finished the last . And yet just where he wrote the first eighty-five pages of '*Barchester Towers*', has remained a mystery. Until now. The novel's original manuscript did not survive, Trollope later explaining that he wrote at this period in railway carriages leaning on a board. Yet the Inverclyde Collection contains a fascinating interview with John Burns in *The World Magazine* in 1889, published after Trollope's death and waspishly annotated by John's daughter Caroline (Lena). ***"... it was here (Castle Wemyss) that Anthony Trollope thought out and wrote a great portion of Barchester Towers."***

This off-the-cuff remark in an interview conducted after Trollope's death could be construed as grabbing reflected glory, an attempt to make a dull businessman interesting. But what if it were true? Why should Trollope have spent time in the winter of 1854/5 holed up 'doon the watter' as they say in Scotland, in the luxurious holiday home of a get-rich-quick government supplier, an evangelical teetotal Christian hardly known for his love of literature. We know Trollope hastily cancelled his European holidays in the summer of 1854 on learning of his promotion and headed for Oban. Did he stay en route at Castle Wemyss? Was this the precursor for a later visit? And why did he not describe in his Autobiography just where he initially had written his first hit novel in which he had taken such 'great delight'? Why did George Burns in his own life story so carefully position Trollope as his *son's* friend despite a 14 year age difference with a story of a walking tour when John Burns, Trollope and Norman Macleod laughed uproariously fuelled by nothing stronger than tea and herrings?

'Thought out and wrote' hardly suggests a flying visit. CP Snow has written that Barchester Towers contains '*one of the most penetrating first chapters in all fiction*'. Re-reading it presents other thoughts. Although the book was written in two parts over a year apart, what notes had Trollope made while in Castle Wemyss for later chapters? Professor Sutherland describes the twelve jet chandeliers of Mrs Proudie's drawing room '*as more appropriate to the gin palace than the Episcopal palace*' and yet looking a 1914 edition of *Scottish Field* in the Collection there is just such exuberant lighting in the drawing room of Castle Wemyss, resplendent in mid Victoriana. Then there is that repeated Scots verse in this most English of novels so often repeated by the Signora '*it's gude to be off wi' the auld luve /Before ye be on wi' the new.*' Trollope also used this in the *New Zealander* which he began writing after initially abandoning *Barchester Towers*. Where had he heard this? The book with its knife-edge dramas of promotion gained and lost, exploits differences in wealth.... I enjoy particularly the aside as he describes the Ullathorne Sports, '*(we cannot all of us always live like grandees, surrounded by an elysium of livery servants)*' The 'always' and the brackets are revealing, as if Trollope wishes to intimate that he has in his time snatched a moment or two of such largesse.

How Harriet nagged me to find the motive for this connection! It was not until I read Edwin Hodder's heavily approved biography of George Burns I finally realised that Trollope possessed something Burns needed desperately. Information. For by late 1854 the cash-cow mail business, which was funding the buy-out of the Cunard consortium and leveraging the Burns fortune, was threatened by the rival Ardrossan Line which, with the Glasgow & S Western Railway Company, proposed a Parliamentary Bill to incorporate time-tabling of rail and boats for faster delivery of passengers and mails to and from Ireland. George Burns had to sink that Bill.

Writing to Viscount Canning Postmaster General in April 1855 Burns suggested the Bill be thrown out "*I dread opposition from incorporated rail roads and*

*steamboats.*” He testified shortly after this to a Parliamentary Committee. I now believe Anthony Trollope stayed at Castle Wemyss that winter to advise on fighting the Bill and wooing the postal service high command, providing a form of 19th century business consultancy. The amendment was thrown out by the Committee and Burns later took over the Ardrossan Line. He only ever sold off one asset, the less profitable Western Isles Line and that to his nephew David MacBrayne, whose name in Caledonian MacBrayne remains part of Scotland’s commercial life.

Legion Railway and Canal Bills were considered by Parliament in 1855, many covering postal arrangements. In July Trollope himself testified in bullish tone to a Parliamentary Committee about postal arrangements in Ireland. ***“I do not think any other officer has local knowledge of the whole district except myself... I have knowledge of the whole of Ireland.”*** John N Hall in his acclaimed biography notes ***“with a detailed use of timetable he (Trollope) showed that railways were not always cheaper and more efficient than cars.”*** Trollope and George Burns successfully opposed railways at a time of huge post office expansion. The relationship had it been known then would not have looked good on the c.v. The fact the book he was writing at the time then became a hit I suggest could have potentially presented a problem for both, without a spot of ‘misremembering’.

What Trollope did find at Castle Wemyss was material for *‘Barchester Towers’*. As good as money in the bank. Trollope was writing shortly before Lord Palmerston became Prime Minister and began promoting evangelicals in the Church of England. Professor Sutherland has praised Trollope’s prescience in his focusing his first chapter on New Bishops with new policies. In fact the Cunard connection explains exactly how he knew of Palmerston’s plans, for George Burns’ close friend and regular house guest was philanthropist Lord Shaftesbury, Palmerston’s stepson-in-law and key church adviser, who ironically had known and encouraged Fanny Trollope years earlier. Shaftesbury had been introduced to Burns in 1850 by fellow Harrovian

Captain Trotter and was to spend fourteen summers at Castle Wemyss. In Edwin Hodder's biography he is quoted, "***I believe that humanly speaking that my visits to the Burns have added ten years to my life.***" The Burns offered luxury cruises around the Western Isles and the Med., regattas, parties on sloping lawns in one of Scotland's most beautiful locations. Who could refuse? Not Anthony Trollope.

Our definition of corruption in these sleaze-sensitive days is irrelevant here; I merely suggest the genesis of this thirty year relationship is just one Trollopian dog that did not bark. This search has given me greater understanding of his work, but there is much left to do for scholars. Certainly Trollope, the professional civil servant was expert at keeping his nose clean. As we know, he had spent his youth dodging bailiffs and creditors, experiences which gave his books such force. As a young Post Office clerk in London, a money lender hovered behind his chair for a £12 debt which quickly compounded to £200. R H Super describes how, in this desperate period, an £3 Irish note disappeared whilst in his possession, leading the Post Office for some time to refuse to reimburse travel expenses after he left for Ireland. Wily George Burns could so easily have played upon the fears and hopes of the financially and socially insecure Trollope. The high moral ground of integrity and honour which Trollope occupies in his autobiography has been accepted unquestioningly by scholars ever since. "***A man who takes public money without earning it is so odious that I can find no sympathy in my heart...nothing would annoy me more than to think I would ever be supposed to be among their number.***" Reading this as a financial journalist how this reminded me of Jonathan Aitken's sword of truth speech! Trollope was a master of personal PR and spin, to use current jargon. Perhaps it is time for the experts to re-examine this end-of-year report more thoroughly, and question the financial side of his life more closely – not least the earnings under those Sundries as listed in his autobiography

In 1858 George Burns retired and the Burns hit the big time, for John, later the first

Lord Inverclyde, greatly expanded the family wealth and influence entertaining the great aboard his luxury yachts. A brilliant networker, he set up a dining club – the Gaiters – based on a love of hillwalking on coming down from Glasgow University to foster useful contacts. The ageing Lord Palmerston was signed up as an honorary member and by 1866 Trollope, now a successful author, was fully paid-up even while a civil servant. In 1868 he was paid £5.5s a day plus expenses by the Post Office as a freelance in a vain attempt to negotiate with the Americans so that the Cunard line could enjoy the transatlantic mail monopoly. He failed but no one doubted his diligence. Then on 26 January 1870, Trollope was Gaiter guest of honour staying with George Burns while writing the opening chapters of *The Eustace Diamonds*. He was once again feeling poor. The Beverly election, problems at St Paul's Magazine and the expensive needs of two sons were depleting his financial amour propre. But the book proved a hit – after two less successful works. “*Mr Trollope is himself again*” commented the Saturday Review. Once again the Burns brought Anthony luck.

This visit is documented, though no one has questioned why Trollope stayed with the *father* on the Wemyss estate when he was supposedly the son's friend. But ‘The World’ interview reveals that Trollope ‘*is supposed to have sketched (Castle Wemyss) roughly as Portray Castle*’ Lizzie Eustace's Ayrshire pile. It was this reference which gave me the idea for inventing the fictional inspiration for Lizzie in the portrait. Editors have sometimes assumed Portray was based on Invereray Castle in Argyll in spite of Lizzie riding with the Ayrshire Hunt and re-marrying in Ayr. Once again I had the feeling that Trollope had airbrushed Castle Wemyss off his literary map, in spite of calling his musings on character ‘castle building’?

Yet as time passed Trollope became one of the gang. A 1878 newspaper cutting in the Inverclyde Collection shows Trollope present when Alexander Graham Bell demonstrated the use of the telephone at the Burns' London home in Queensgate, using twelve phones connected by wires from the National History Museum. Guests

included the Earl of Shaftesbury and Gladstone. The following month Anthony Trollope departed from Wemyss Bay with John Burns and friends on a corporate hospitality jolly to Iceland in the brand new Cunard mailship, the HMS Mastiff. Trollope's account *'How The Mastiffs Went To Iceland'* was privately published by John Burns. "***A kinder host I never knew, but seldom a sterner lord,***" Trollope wrote.

As Victoria Glendinning describes in her acclaimed biography, in Mrs Blackburn's account of the expedition in *Good Words* magazine, Trollope was not mentioned, and all but one of the sketches of him as one of the group in her original fifty-six drawings were erased from the published accounts. Glendinning asks whether this was her idea or his. Was it shyness or sensitivity to pictures showing him enjoying this fat cat businessman's junket, preferring a position as professional in-house chronicler one removed? Whatever the explanation *'How The Mastiffs Went To Iceland'* was cleverly used by John Burns as a marketing tool. The Collection contains a letter from the German Embassy thanking Burns on the Kaiser's behalf for the book. Astonishingly, in annotating The World article Caroline Burns (Lena) comments, "***Anthony Trollope did write How The Mastiffs Went to Iceland. I was much disgusted that no cheque resulted therefrom.***"

At first I thought she was joking but her tone throughout is acerbic, and adult – the notes clearly written some years later and possibly intended for her future sister-in-law Charlotte Nugent-Dunbar the future third Lady Inverclyde. Yet Trollope in a letter to John Burns on returning from Iceland is fulsome. "***Tell Lena that as I have no stern parent to repress my feelings, I send her my love – which I think I may do to the daughter, seeing that I certainly love the father,***" Why the difference in tone? A single girl, Lena would have sat next to Trollope at dinner and possibly suggested Trollope for this in-house PR job. What fee did Trollope receive from which he was too mean to pay her commission? How many years was he on his 'stern lord's'

payroll? Interestingly in his Autobiography 11% of his listed literary income is itemised as Sundries. Much would have come from travel articles but the term remains conveniently vague.

John Burns died in 1901. His two sons, then grandson succeeded to the title but the line died out in 1957. Subsequently, the Castle's roof was removed and by 1995, it was just a pile of rubble above the Clyde, while the gardens where Trollope, Shaftesbury and Palmerston ate strawberries and cream lay overgrown. Housing development began and a unique slice of our history disappeared. Only Murdo's pier, restored in a back garden, remains.

Biographers have unsurprisingly misunderstood and underestimated this relationship. RH Super suggests that Trollope was introduced to John Burns by Norman Macleod – Macleod was in fact Minister of Glasgow's Barony Church formerly George Burns father's church years before. Victoria Glendinning confuses old George Burns for John, although John did have a son called George, the second Lord Inverclyde. John N Hall, describes the relationship between John Burns and Trollope as dating from the 1860s while Richard Mullen refers to John Burns and Trollope as being friends 'for years'. How successfully Trollope and George Burns covered their tracks. It was John Burns who let slip the genesis of the relationship, once the family wealth and power was assured. Interestingly he calls *The Eustace Diamonds* 'Lady Eustace's Diamonds'. Possibly he had not read it – the novel not being an art form highly prized by evangelical Christians! The magazine interview was also being conducted long after Trollope's death with a mere journalist. Burns could hardly have imagined our generation's fascination with Trollope's life and works and that the wife of his Yachtmaster's great-great-grandson would be another misbegotten member of the fourth estate!

Business can never beat art for immortality. It is our consolation. In an age where

global business holds such power, until now on the Web, there has been no mention of George and John Burns whose fortunes were based on their own period's new modes of carrying information. Yet Anthony Trollope, the writer civil servant who fretted about money and so effectively used his commercial knowledge to help the Burns to dazzling wealth, is feted in thousands of pages throughout cyberspace.

Gifford Fairlie and the divine Isabella are, alas, fiction. Yet, however we may demur, all writers gain inspiration from those around them, so who knows what feisty Scottish beauty may have inspired Trollope as he created Lizzie Eustace, while staying on the Castle Wemyss Estate in January 1870? My own character of Isabella is based upon Mary Wilson, a young woman born in 1869 and brought up to enjoy the high Victorian splendour of Castle Wemyss. Her life took a similar path to Isabella's. She is the great-great-grandmother of my daughter Ella, to whom this book is dedicated.

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The Love Child is now out, published by Hodder & Stoughton, price £16.99. The paperback will be published on 5 December, 2000, price £6.99. Antonia Swinson is planning to lecture on her findings. email her on [antswin@aol.com](mailto:antswin@aol.com).