

Victorian Novels and Novelists

Nora Anderson

I think that Victorian writers have much in common with those of today. They wrote copiously; maybe the need to earn a living, but more likely because they wanted to write. Their work was not particularly concerned with plot, more with the character of those they were writing about. Much contemporary fiction is the same.

Some of the Victorians wrote with more talent than others. I have struggled with Benjamin Disraeli's novels. Writing doesn't seem to have been his forte! He should have stuck to politics or buttering up Queen Victoria.



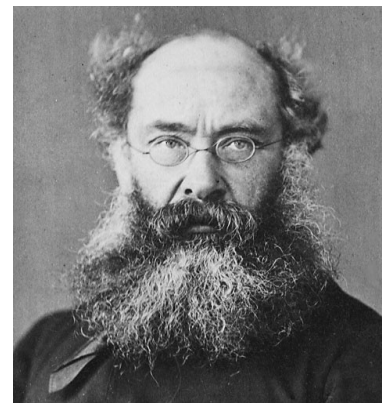
Women authors played their part: Mrs Henry Wood with all her sentimentality "Dead – and never called me Mother"; Mrs Gaskell a feminist and social activist well ahead of her time and much more effective than Germaine Greer.

Next comes Thomas Hardy. The gritty reality of his writing can be somewhat depressing, particularly so in *Jude the Obscure* – leave his novels on the shelf if you need cheering up. Amongst the 'greats' I have to confess that I do not like Dickens. Heresy of heresies! His characters are more like cartoons; Mr Pickwick would not be out of place in a boy's comic.

My first love is Anthony Trollope. He wrote to support his family when their fortunes were at low ebb. He worked for the Post Office and, such was his discipline, he wrote for two hours every morning before leaving for work. He was ambitious too and had thoughts of

standing for Parliament. His other interests included riding to hounds.

Writing must have been in his blood. His mother, who was a very strong character (could he have based Mrs Proudie on her?), removed the family to the United States and herself wrote to keep the family fed. His books divide roughly into two – political and the Church. Once one has read the Barchester novels who could forget dear old Doctor Harding, the Precentor of the cathedral and warden of Hiram's Hospital, and his care for the old pensioners. Also noteworthy are his two lovely daughters and their swains. A reminder of this today is Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* – the same effort to bring about a suitable marriage.



Trollope's stories of church life are equally unforgettable. The hen-pecked Bishop of Barchester, and his formidable wife Mrs Proudie (how aptly named!), along with Mr Slope the oily curate. One lives the uneasy life of the bishop's palace – where most visitors are completely daunted by Mrs Proudie; but not so when Mr Crawley calls on the bishop. The impoverished clergyman, accused of stealing money, tells the Bishop that he must obey his principles and stick to a higher authority than the Bishop. He even calls Mrs Proudie 'woman'. For once she is routed!

These are examples of glorious writing. Every age produces great writers. Who is matching this today? Who will be the classics of tomorrow?