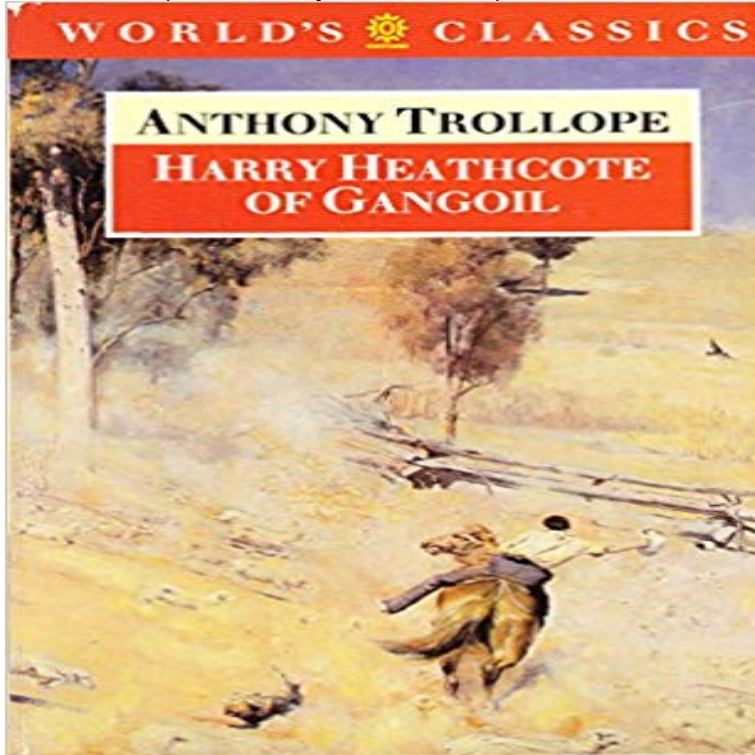


Anthony Trollope - Harry Heathcote Of Gangoil (Illustrated)



Trollope wrote this very short novel (only about 45,000 words) for the Christmas issue of a London magazine. Regarding Victorian sentimentality about the holiday as humbug, he presented a very different sort of Yuletide tale, one in which there are no snow flakes and no sleigh bells - and in which fires are not cozy but frightening. The hero is a prosperous young sheep rancher in Queensland, where December is the hottest, driest month of the year, when a careless match can spark a ruinous blaze and in a few hours wipe out all that a man has built through years of labor. Careless matches are not the only danger. Harry has just as much fear of malicious ones. He is an imperious ruler of his domain (120,000 acres leased from the Crown) and prides himself on his unflinching candor. Not surprisingly, he is at feud with his shiftless, thieving neighbors, the Brownbie clan, and is quite willing to quarrel with Giles Medlicot, another neighbor, when Medlicot hires on a hand whom Harry has dismissed for insubordination and suspects of plotting arson. In other Trollope novels, war to the knife means snubbing an enemy in the street or not inviting him to a garden party. In this one, conflict is simpler and more violent. With the grass growing more parched by the hour, Harry's enemies gather, scheme and strike. Because Trollope is not a tragedian, they are thwarted - narrowly - and there is even a Christmas dinner to conclude the story and incidentally seal a budding romance. But the pacing and atmosphere are very different from the Trollope that readers expect. The picture of a frontier society, living almost in a Hobbesian state of nature, is vivid, and the moral consequences of that state are clearly drawn. Harry's refusal to compromise with what he believes to be wrong is a principle that can be safely followed only where the structures of law and order offer shelter. Where a man must be his own constable,

high principle is a dangerous luxury. The appearance of two colonial policemen at the end, as helpless to punish the malefactors as they were to forestall them, underlines the impotence of the law and perhaps reminded Trollopes audience of the excellence of their own social arrangements. Alert members of that audience will perhaps have noticed that Queensland displays ironic inversions of English certitudes. Most notably, Harry leases his land and therefore considers himself socially much above Medlicot, who has purchased his. In the home country, of course, a land owner who farmed his property (Medlicot is a sugar grower) would have looked severely down upon a man who kept livestock on rented pastures. Unfortunately, despite its excellent qualities, Harry Heathcote suffers a defect that reduces it to the Trollopien second class (albeit that is no low place to be). In so short a work, nothing should be wasted, and too many words are wasted here on a perfunctory romance, one of the least interesting that Trollope ever devised. Medlicots courtship of Harrys sister-in-law not only adds nothing to the narrative but is positively detrimental, as it gives the neighbor a self-interested motive for his decision to take Harrys side against the Brownbie conspiracy rather than maintain a fair-minded neutrality. Anyone who has never read Trollope should not begin here, but the authors fans will not regret passing a few hours with him in the Australian bush.

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