

A TROLLOPE! A TROLLOPE!

The most notorious woman in Cincinnati's literary history, indeed arguably the most notorious woman in America in her day, arrived at the city's public landing on February 10, 1828, a total unknown. The short, plump, bright-faced Englishwoman with Saxon coloring, Frances (Fanny) Trollope, along with two daughters, a manservant, and a young Frenchman, disembarked the steamboat *Criterion* from Memphis, found a hotel, and set in motion a tale that some say affects the city to this day.

In 1828, Cincinnati was booming. Although it had been founded only forty years earlier, the population had already grown to about twenty thousand. Immigrants were pouring in, and commerce was strong. Indeed, it was Cincinnati's reputation as the country's fastest-growing city that drew Trollope. She and her family (she had a husband and three other children back in England) were facing financial ruin; she needed money.¹

The forty-nine-year-old Trollope had come to America less than two months earlier, when her social reformer friend Fanny Wright asked her to join her "experiment," a settlement known as Nashoba in the backwoods near Memphis. Wright's plan was to purchase slaves and set them to work building a new community to pay back their purchase price. After that, they would be given free passage out of the country.²

Artist Auguste Hervieu, an exile from monarchist France who was the Trollope children's drawing teacher, came along on the



FIGURE 1.1 Fanny Trollope, engraving by Joseph Brown. *Cincinnati Museum Center—Cincinnati Historical Society Library*

American excursion as drawing master for Nashoba. Both he and Trollope, however, were horrified at the primitive conditions they found. They quickly resolved to flee to Cincinnati and appealed to Nashoba for a \$300 loan to make the trip.

Trollope's initial impression of Cincinnati was positive. She described the city in an early letter as a "remote but very pretty nest." The weather was dreary, but "the country beautiful, and wonderful in its rapid progress towards the wealth and the wisdom, the finery and the folly of the Old World; and I like it well," she said.³ However, there was one unpleasant episode almost immediately: her innkeeper berated her for having the audacity to ask for tea in her room.⁴

The Trollope party quickly moved out of the hotel into a rented house on Race Street near the center of town.⁵ Unfortunately, the new place proved unsatisfactory too. Trollope had failed to notice that there was no drain, pump, or cistern for the house, and no way to dispose of garbage. When she inquired of the landlord what to do about the garbage, he told her to put it in the middle of the road for the hogs, which roamed everywhere. Mrs. Trollope, who had little appreciation for Cincinnati's status as the hog capital of the world, was simply shocked. She grew even more outraged when the hogs nuzzled her hands as she walked about town.⁶

Trollope had sent her sixteen-year-old son Henry to an Indiana school when she left Memphis, but that became a problem as well. The school advertised a work/study program, but there was more work than study, and Henry got ill. Trollope had to borrow money from Hervieu to bring her son to Cincinnati. Soon Hervieu became her complete financial support, because Mr. Trollope did not answer her desperate pleas for money. She frantically searched for a solution, and one of her first ideas was to put Henry, who was by then recovering, to work giving Latin lessons. Mrs. Trollope ran an advertisement in the March 28, 1828, edition of the *Cincinnati Gazette* seeking fifty cents an hour for his services.

Meanwhile, Hervieu started a drawing school and began painting on the side.⁷

The Trollopes moved once again after Henry joined them, this time to a rented cottage in a community known as Mohawk, about a mile and a half from downtown on the corner of Dunlop Street and McMicken Avenue (until 1870 this was Hamilton Road).⁸ According to Fanny's son Tom, who later visited from England, the new place was "a roomy, bright-looking house, built of wood, and all white with the exception of the green Venetian blinds. It stood in its own 'grounds,' but these grounds consisted of a large field, uncultivated save for a few potatoes in one corner of it."⁹ Known as Gano Lodge, it proved to be a better home for the Trollopes, but problems still plagued them. Hogs, those infernal hogs, were fed and lodged there; then a new slaughterhouse opened nearby, putting dead animals in close proximity to what otherwise would have been pretty streams.

Mrs. Trollope also discovered that her new neighbors tended to drop in without notice, conducting what she considered boorish conversation in displays of "violent intimacy."¹⁰

Mrs. Trollope did make a few friends in Cincinnati and was entertained at least a few times. For example, the former proprietor of Egyptian Hall, a London museum, threw a dinner party in her honor in northern Kentucky shortly after her arrival. And she held at least one dinner party herself, entertaining about a hundred guests with theatricals and dancing.¹¹ However, with little money and no local contacts, she was hardly cutting a large figure in Cincinnati society. She had brought no letters of introduction to the city, an oversight that proved grave. She finally requested one from the marquis de Lafayette, who had previously visited Cincinnati and was an acquaintance through Fanny Wright, but his letter failed to arrive in time to help.¹²

One new friend did prove fortuitous. Joseph Dorfeuille, a New Orleans naturalist, was the curator of the Western Museum at the

corner of Main and Columbia Streets. Filled with objects Cincinnatians found of little interest—Indian artifacts, minerals, and fossils—the museum was attracting few visitors. Dorfeuille ordered wax figures to spur business and hired a young assistant named Hiram Powers to repair those that arrived damaged. Mrs. Trollope hit it off with Powers immediately and came up with an idea for a new attraction. It was called “Invisible Girl” and featured Henry Trollope as an oracle. Some of Hervieu’s artwork was included as well.¹³

“Invisible Girl” was such a success that Hervieu, Mrs. Trollope, and Powers, who later became one of the best-known sculptors of the nineteenth century, tackled another exhibit suggested by Mrs. Trollope. Taking its inspiration from Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, it was known as “Infernal Regions.”¹⁴ Mrs. Trollope wrote a four-page program featuring quotations she translated from Dante, as well as what her son Tom later described as “explanations of the author’s meaning, and descriptions in very bugaboo style, and in every variety of type, with capitals of every sort of size, of all the horrors of the supposed scene.”¹⁵ “Infernal Regions” was a triumph. It ran for more than twenty-five years and is credited with saving the museum from extinction. It still exists today, as part of the Cincinnati Museum Center at Union Terminal.¹⁶

At some point, probably after her husband and son arrived for a visit late in 1828, Mrs. Trollope conceived her grandest money-making scheme yet. She had become convinced that there was a market for fancy goods and a need for entertainment venues in the bustling city. She had observed that Cincinnatians didn’t play billiards or cards, didn’t put on concerts or dinner parties, and rarely attended theatrical performances.¹⁷ She thought them, in fact, the dullest people she had ever met and reasoned that they could use some fun. She would build a structure to house a bazaar for upscale goods, a coffeehouse, an “elegant Saloon” for refreshments, a bar room, an exhibition gallery, a ballroom, and a place for panoramic exhibitions.¹⁸ By January of 1829, she and her husband

had purchased land for the project, and Mr. Trollope had agreed to return to England to raise money for it.¹⁹

Mrs. Trollope contracted malaria and almost died in the summer of 1829, but the bazaar went up anyway. Situated on Third Street east of Broadway, near the site of old Fort Washington, it was designed by Seneca Palmer and was without question the most unusual building ever built in Cincinnati.²⁰ Mrs. Trollope, a romantic at heart, wanted to make a statement to attract attention, and so she did. The four-story structure, sometimes considered the first department store, most closely resembled the Egyptian Revival style, but was actually something of a hodgepodge in design. Timothy Flint, editor of the *Western Monthly Review* and one of the few people Trollope liked in Cincinnati, described it as a “queer, unique, crescented Turkish Babel.”²¹ Urgently in need of money, Trollope pushed up the opening before construction was finished and invited the public to visit on October 16, 1829. Cincinnatians were not impressed, with either the goods or the design. Nor did they like the smell. Trollope’s innovative plan to provide lighting with gas, possibly for the first time in the city, went awry, and the bazaar smelled like rotten eggs. She ran an ad to announce that she had switched to oil and spermaceti, but people stayed away anyway.²²

Mrs. Trollope was also disappointed in the knickknacks, furniture, stationery, china, and so forth that her husband had sent for the bazaar in lieu of money. To make matters worse, she had failed to notice that her offerings were already available in other shops at cheaper prices and that her location, apart from the main shopping area, wasn’t the best. And, of course, she hadn’t really connected with the city’s leading citizens, who might have made the place a success. Yet, she persevered. She presented two evenings of a “Musical Fantasia,” but audiences were slim. Hervieu exhibited a massive painting, *The Landing of Lafayette at Cincinnati*, but no luck. By early March 1830, financial disaster had struck. The goods of the bazaar, as well as Mrs. Trollope’s personal belongings, were seized

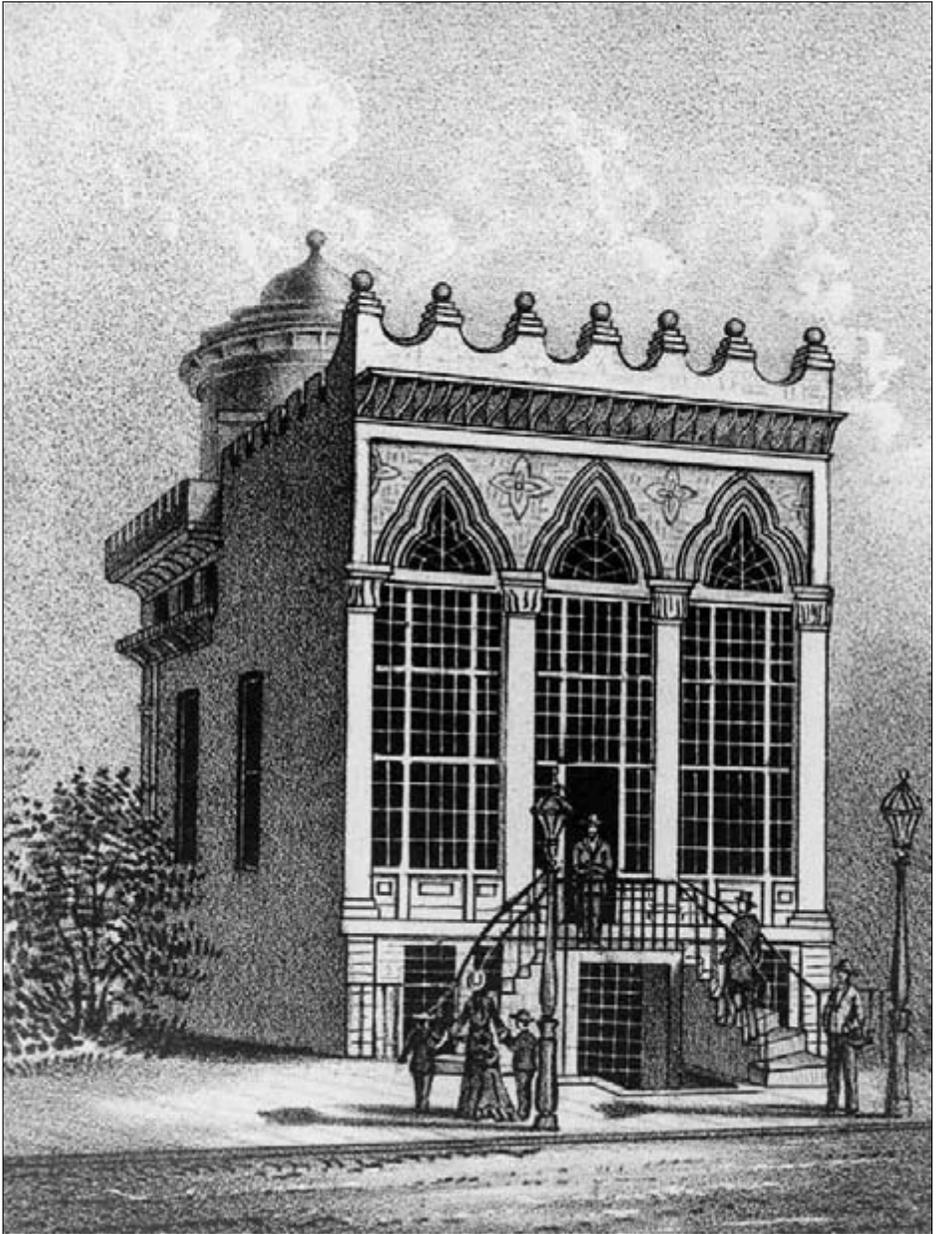


FIGURE 1.2 Trollope's Bazaar on Third Street. *Cincinnati Museum Center—Cincinnati Historical Society Library*

by creditors, and Mrs. Trollope and party were thrown out of their house. A neighbor took them in briefly, but soon they boarded the *Lady Franklin* to get out of town.²³

Fanny Trollope is believed to have had a travel book in mind from the beginning. Such books were popular at the time, and she kept voluminous notes toward that possible end. She began keeping notes on Cincinnati early in her stay, and three notebooks with some sixty-four thousand words on her American experience are now in the Lilly Library of Indiana University at Bloomington.²⁴ After she fled the city, she decided she should see other parts of America to broaden her perspective, so she briefly visited Washington, Philadelphia, Virginia, New York, and Niagara Falls. She also stayed for a while with a friend in Maryland. By the time she returned to England in August of 1831, her manuscript was almost done.

When *Domestic Manners of the Americans* came out in 1832, the English, curious about life in America and wrestling with the question of whether to institute greater democracy themselves, devoured the book.²⁵ Of course, Americans read it too, appalled at their depiction as rude, spitting, bumpkins who lived in a land filled with freewheeling hogs and nasty mosquitoes. The term “to trollope” was coined to suggest harsh criticism. A man who failed to sit with proper decorum in his theater box or spat on the floor of the music hall was hailed with “A Trollope! A Trollope!”²⁶ Mrs. Trollope was scorned everywhere in America.

With almost half of *Domestic Manners* specifically focused on Cincinnati, its residents were particularly upset. Cincinnati’s self-image and its public image, both of which had been strong when Mrs. Trollope arrived, were seriously damaged. The local citizenry, who thought Mrs. Trollope the rude one, lashed out in anger. Historians have sometimes argued that the book had a positive effect on Cincinnati because it prompted the city to improve its cultural offerings (they are now considered excellent), but Mrs. Trollope’s notoriety lives on. As recently as 2003, noted author and literary

critic Edmund White, a native Cincinnati, published *Fanny: A Fiction*, a historical novel that assumes the voice of Mrs. Trollope to tell what purports to be the story of Fanny Wright. The fictional Trollope lapses extensively into tales of her own life, and there, with some embellishments, it all is again: the bazaar, the Western Museum, the hogs, the crude Cincinnati manners. Fortunately, White at least lets poor Hervieu off the hook. Cincinnatians had always gossiped about his relationship with Trollope, but it was probably innocent. White gives her a clandestine affair with an African American blacksmith named Cudjo instead.

Domestic Manners comes off today as somewhat mild, probably truthful, often comic, and in some ways predictable, given that Cincinnati was still a frontier city and that the English and American cultures of the day were so different. Nor is it surprising that Mrs. Trollope, who had miserable experiences in the city, found little to her liking except the meat and vegetables. On the contrary, as one writer pointed out, it is something of a backhanded compliment that she compared a frontier town in its infancy to the great old capitals of Europe.²⁷

Fanny Trollope went on to write forty more books, including four novels in which she drew upon her travels in America. One, *The Old World and the New*, features a family not unlike her own that settles on an estate about ten miles from Cincinnati. That book looks more gently at the area, but is rarely read today and never eclipsed the picture she first painted. Although Mrs. Trollope endured other difficult periods—financial struggles, the death of her husband in 1834, and the deaths of three of her five adult children from tuberculosis—she never gave up and ended her life in luxury, living in a Florence mansion called Villa Trollope with her son Tom and his family. Her son Anthony, whose work is said to owe a debt to hers, became one of the Victorian era's most respected authors, and she herself is credited not only with one of the earliest successful writing careers for women but also with

influencing the writing of Charles Dickens, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Elizabeth Gaskell, William Makepeace Thackeray, and Charlotte Brontë.²⁸ She is even given kudos in the art world. She maintained her friendship with Hiram Powers in Europe and encouraged him to branch out from parlor busts into more imaginative work.²⁹ She died on October 6, 1863, at the age of eighty-four.

Trollope's bazaar was sold to wealthy local arts patron Nicholas Longworth in 1834 and was acquired by the Ohio Mechanics Institute in 1839. The OMI moved out in 1843, and, in the years ahead, "Trollope's Folly" housed a dancing school, medical school, female medical college, hydropathical establishment, convalescent home for federal soldiers, and even a house of prostitution. It was demolished in 1881.³⁰