

“The Sins of the Father”

By Donald E. Curtis

The phrase “The sins of the father” is found in Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy and refers to God’s warning that the sons will suffer from the sins of their fathers. When a father fails his family, the effects of that failure are often felt for generations. Society has always expected fathers to support their family, and not just economically. If a father fails to train his children through words or example, the children will often suffer the consequences. Whether or not this is fair is not the issue. Failure, like sin, is in the world, and the consequences are likely to affect future generations.

OK...enough...this is NOT a theological paper.

Instead, I want us to look at how the sins (or the behavior) of three specific fathers influenced three specific sons. The sons are all familiar names; they happen to be three of my favorite writers. Many facts about the accomplishments of the sons are well-known, whereas the biographies of the fathers are a bit more obscure. The cast of characters in tonight’s paper includes Anthony Trollope and his father Thomas Anthony Trollope, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and his father Charles Altamont Doyle, and Charles Dickens and his father John Dickens.

Trollope, the son...

During the Victorian era, few writers achieved the triumph of Anthony Trollope. He balanced a long and successful career with the Post Office with a highly prolific and financially rewarding career as a novelist, while leading an active life in sport and society. From a poor and miserable childhood, Trollope gradually rose to the top.

He was presented with the opportunity for a first-rate education at Harrow and Winchester College, but his low social status and family poverty made him the brunt of cruel treatment by his aristocratic peers. His misery was so intense that he once contemplated suicide. After school, while his family was living in Belgium where they had fled to escape debtor’s

prison, a family friend arranged for Anthony to have a clerkship in the Post Office at £90 a year. He returned to London and embarked upon this post in 1834. In his own words, Trollope reported, “the first seven years of my official life were neither creditable to myself nor useful to the public service.” He was constantly tardy and insubordinate. He hated the work and his colleagues, but as no options seemed available, he plodded onward and was in constant fear of dismissal.

Finally, an escape hatch opened. A postal surveyor’s clerkship became available in central Ireland and Anthony jumped at the chance. The work was not in an office, but as a traveling inspector moving about the countryside on horseback. He loved the work and immediately began to develop a productive work ethic and within a year was regarded as a valuable public servant. Living in Ireland was cheap and in addition to his salary he was given generous travel allowances which allowed him to enjoy a sense of prosperity. He took up fox hunting which he would continue for the rest of his life, and soon became engaged to marry Rose Heseltine, a Yorkshire girl he met in Ireland.

As Trollope prospered in Ireland, he began to feel the need to write. He first produced two novels which did not sell well, but he enjoyed the creative experience and persevered. One might well think he was genetically predisposed to write. Though unsuccessful, his father had written for years on a never-published ecclesiastical history. Fanny Trollope, Anthony’s mother had rescued the family financially through her very successful “Domestic Manners of the Americans” and over a hundred other books. Anthony’s older brother Thomas Adolphus Trollope earned his bread during a lifetime of writing about Italy and the Italians. Like most wise authors, Trollope chose to write about what he knew and set his early work in Ireland. His English publishers thought this an error as people didn’t care much for Irish tales.

Anthony was happy with his Post Office work, his bride, and his young family, and he was happy with his writing – never mind that it didn’t pay. He enjoyed it, took pride in it, so he kept at it. During twelve years, he produced 4 novels, a history, and a play essentially without compensation other than the intrinsic reward of his craft. In 1851, Trollope returned to

England on a temporary assignment to investigate and reorganize rural mail delivery in the western counties. Anthony travelled over much of England on horseback and became very familiar with every part of the countryside. He commented in his autobiography that these were “two of the happiest years of my life.”

It was during this time that he visited Salisbury Cathedral and conceived the plot of *The Warden* which became the first novel in the now-famous six-book Barchester series. The book was published in 1855, and though the financial rewards were not great, he was reviewed well in the press and thus encouraged. Never one to rest on his laurels, Trollope started work on a sequel called *Barchester Towers*. His success grew gradually providing him with a very substantial second career as one of England’s greatest authors.

As success came to Trollope, he established a home first at Waltham, just twelve miles from London. This was a convenient location for reaching London easily, but also near the country where he could ride to the hounds. Later he relocated to London proper and was frequently to be seen with his literary friends at both the Garrick and the Athenaeum Clubs

During his writing career, which didn’t gain notice until he was in his 40’s, he produced 48 novels, an autobiography, several volumes of short stories and many works of non-fiction, mostly about his travels around the world and a biography of his dear friend William Makepeace Thackeray.

Trollope’s work method is legendary...nearly every day, he rose at 5am and wrote 250 words each quarter hour until 8am when he prepared for the day and proceeded to his work for the Post Office. He wrote at home, if there, otherwise he wrote on trains or aboard ship, but never neglected his diligence to either his first or his second career.

Trollope died in 1882 and was buried in Kensal Green Cemetery in London. In 1993, Prime Minister John Major officiated at the placement of a memorial to Trollope in Westminster Abbey’s Poets Corner.

Trollope, the father...

Thomas Anthony Trollope, Anthony's father, came from a genteel background and was connected to the landed gentry. Though the son of a respected clergyman, he was to be heir to his uncle Adolphus, a baronet with a beautiful estate in Hertfordshire. He had great expectations and additionally, he prepared for the bar, became a Fellow of New College, Oxford, and began work as a barrister. He also had pretensions to be a gentleman farmer and began by leasing a rambling farmhouse and land near Harrow. Unfortunately, he was a very unlucky man whose expectations all came to naught. His first great hope was dashed when his Uncle Adolphus married late in life and produced an heir. Soon he began to suffer from depression and migraine headaches. Already the owner of a ferocious temper, he began under his health stresses to harass and berate his legal clients until they all fled. So much for his career at the bar. Then came his farming failures. Every attempt to succeed there resulted in greater financial loss.

This man who had expected so much from life was constantly disappointed. Even his ambition for his sons to follow his path from Harrow to Winchester College and then on to Oxford was thwarted by his increasing poverty.

Meanwhile, Anthony's mother Frances Trollope had removed the family to America, where she opened a bazaar in Cincinnati. The business venture was a financial failure, but upon her return, Fanny Trollope wrote and published her *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, an immediate success which launched her on a successful career as a writer. Thomas Anthony's illness, failed legal practice, and his disastrous farming ventures compounded to cause the family to flee the country to avoid arrest for debt. They moved to a house near Bruges and were supported by Fanny's literary earnings.

Anthony had finished his schooling and just after receiving his clerkship at the Post Office in London, Thomas Anthony Trollope died. To treat his migraines, he has taken increasingly large doses of calomel, a mercury-based drug. While living in Bruges they lost two of their children to tuberculosis. After such tragic disappointments, Thomas Anthony

Trollope likely died of premature old age from mercury poisoning and a broken heart.

Despite his childhood sufferings, Anthony loved and respected both his parents. His mother had begun his education by teaching him his letters at home. Then she left him behind in school while she ventured to America. His father had drilled him in his Latin, though he was usually distracted with worry about his own troubles. In his latter years, Anthony remembered these exercises fondly. They had both sacrificed much family life to their ambitions, but Anthony benefitted later from having observed their work ethic and perseverance. The question is...was it worth it?

Doyle, the son...

In May, 1859, Arthur Conan Doyle was born to an affluent, Irish-Catholic family in Edinburgh, Scotland. Doyle's family was well-respected in the art world. His grandfather, John Doyle was known as "HB" and was one of the most famous political cartoonists of the day. His uncle Richard "Dickie" Doyle was a prominent illustrator often featured in *Punch* magazine, and another Uncle Henry Doyle became the director of the National Gallery in Ireland. His father, Charles Altamont Doyle, had aspirations of a successful career in art, but instead became addicted to alcohol and suffered from DTs, depression, and epilepsy. As a result, the elder Doyle had few accomplishments to speak of. Doyle's mother, Mary, was a lively and well-educated woman who loved to read. She particularly delighted in telling young Arthur wild stories. Her great enthusiasm and animation while spinning bizarre tales sparked the child's imagination. As Doyle would later recall, "In my early childhood, as far as I can remember anything at all, the vivid stories she would tell me stand out so clearly that they obscure the real facts of my life."

At the age of 9, Doyle was shipped off to England, where he would attend Stonyhurst and on to study at Stonyhurst College for the next five years. For Doyle, the boarding-school experience was brutal: his classmates bullied him, and the school practiced ruthless corporal punishment against

its students. Over time, Doyle found consolation in his flair for storytelling, and developed an avid audience among the younger students.

When Doyle graduated, his family expected that he would follow in their footsteps and study art, but he had decided to pursue a medical degree at the University of Edinburgh. At med school, Doyle met his mentor, Professor Dr. Joseph Bell, whose keen powers of observation would later inspire the traits of Doyle's famed fictional detective character, Sherlock Holmes. At the University of Edinburgh, Doyle also had the good fortune to meet classmates and future fellow authors James Barrie and Robert Louis Stevenson. While a medical student, Doyle took his own first stab at writing, and published a few stories in London magazines.

During Doyle's third year of medical school, he took a ship surgeon's post on a whaling ship sailing for the Arctic Circle. The voyage further awakened Doyle's sense of adventure.

Doyle returned to medical school and he received his Bachelor of Medicine degree in 1881. Owing to an interest in spiritualism, Doyle had by this time renounced his Roman Catholic faith.

Doyle's first paying job as a doctor took the form of a medical officer's position on the steamship *Mayumba*, travelling from Liverpool to Africa. After his stint at sea, Doyle settled in Plymouth, England for a time. When his funds were nearly gone, he relocated to Portsmouth and opened his first practice. He spent the next few years struggling to balance his burgeoning medical career with his efforts to gain recognition as an author. In addition to the first two Sherlock Holmes stories, during this period Doyle wrote and published two of his best-known early works, *Micah Clark* and *The White Company*. Doyle would later give up medicine altogether, in order to devote all of his attention to his writing.

In 1885, while still struggling to make it as a writer, Doyle met and married his first wife, Louisa Hawkins. The couple moved to Upper Wimpole Street and had two children, a daughter and a son. In 1893, Louisa was diagnosed with tuberculosis. While Louisa was ailing, Doyle

developed a platonic affection for a young woman named Jean Leckie. Louisa ultimately died of tuberculosis, in 1906. The following year, Doyle would remarry to Jean Leckie, with whom he would have two sons and a daughter.

In 1886, newly married and still struggling to make it as an author, Doyle started writing the mystery novel *A Tangled Skein*. Two years later, the novel was renamed *A Study in Scarlet* and was published in *Beeton's Christmas Annual*. In this story he introduces Sherlock Holmes and his friend and assistant, Dr. John Watson. The publication of short stories featuring Holmes and Watson in the new *Strand Magazine* finally earned Doyle the recognition and earnings he had so desired. Over the course of his writing career he penned a total of 60 stories about Sherlock Holmes.

Doyle's great ambition was to be remembered for his historical novels. The prolific author created many memorable characters in his writings in several genres. The list includes not only Holmes and Watson, but Professor Challenger, Brigadier Gerard, Sir Nigel Loring, and others. He pioneered in crime fiction, science fiction, wrote about medicine, and spiritualism. In addition to novels, Doyle wrote dozens of short stories and wrote eloquent non-fiction such as his defense of the British position in the Boer War which earned him a knighthood.

Doyle enjoyed the fame and financial success that came with Sherlock Holmes, but felt the detective was a distraction from his "serious" writing and in 1893, to his readers' disdain, he killed Sherlock Holmes to focus more on his other writing. His public was aghast and let him know, but he held out for several years until the monetary offers were irresistible. Holmes was resurrected in *The Adventure of the Empty House*. He continued to write Holmes stories 'til near the time of his death.

Having recently been diagnosed with Angina Pectoris, Doyle stubbornly ignored his doctor's warnings, and in the fall of 1929, embarked on a spiritualism tour. He returned home with chest pains so severe that he needed to be carried on shore, and was thereafter almost entirely bedridden at his home in Crowborough, England where he died in July of 1930.

Doyle, the father...

Charles Altamont Doyle was born about 1832. Little is known about his childhood, but at about seventeen he moved to Edinburgh to take a civil service job in Her Majesty's Office of Works. After marrying the daughter of his landlady, he supplemented his income with money from painting and book illustrations. As his family grew, life looked promising – a good job, a budding art career, but his low self-esteem and feelings of inadequacy caused him to seek solace in alcohol.

Due to the demands of his job, he could not devote much time to his art and grew depressed. As his dreams faded, this led to more depression which led to more alcohol, and the more he drank the more his paintings became dark and macabre.

Eventually he was separated from his family and lived in a nursing home for the treatment of his alcoholism. He then developed epilepsy which doomed him to a life of confinement. Increasing violence caused him to be placed in one asylum after another. After twelve years in asylums, he was taken by a severe epileptic seizure and died in 1893.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had spent little of his life with his father, being in boarding school for so long and also due to his father's lengthy confinements. He did try to honor his father in 1924 by organizing an exhibition of his artwork.

Dickens, the son...

Charles Dickens was born February 7, 1812, in Portsmouth, on the Channel coast of England. He was the second of eight children. His father, John Dickens, was employed by the Navy Pay Office. The elder Dickens habitually spent more than he earned, always trying to behave as a gentleman, but without the means. Charles' mother, Elizabeth Barrow, aspired to be a teacher and operate her own school. Though his parents' were ambitious and constantly attempted to better their lot, the family remained poor. Nevertheless, they were happy in the early days. In 1816, they moved to Chatham, Kent, where Charles and his siblings were free to roam the countryside and explore the marshlands and the old castle at

Rochester. With his father, he often passed Gad's Hill, a lovely country home which Charles admired. His father advised him to "work hard and someday you may live there." Eventually, he did.

In 1822, the Dickens family moved to Camden Town, a poor neighborhood in London. By then the family's financial situation had grown dire, as John Dickens had continued his dangerous habit of living beyond his means. Eventually, John was imprisoned for debt in 1824; Charles was just 12 years old.

During his father's imprisonment, Charles Dickens was forced to abandon his education to work at a shoe polish factory alongside the River Thames. At the rundown, rat-infested factory, Dickens earned six shillings a week labeling pots of "blacking," a substance used to clean shoes and fireplaces. It was the best he could do to help support his family. Later, when Dickens recalled the experience, he saw it as the low point of his young life, stating that he wondered "how [he] could be so easily cast away at such a young age." He felt abandoned and betrayed by the adults who were supposed to take care of him. These sentiments would later become a recurring theme in his writing.

After a few months in Marshalsea Debtors' Prison, John Dickens received a small family inheritance and was able to pay his debts. Charles was able to return briefly to school, but when he was 15, his education was pulled out from under him once again. In 1827, he had to drop out of school and work as an office boy to contribute to his family's income. Fortunately, the job became an early launching point for his writing career.

During his first year, Dickens began freelance reporting at the law courts of London. Just a few years later, he was reporting for two major London newspapers. In 1833, he began submitting sketches to various magazines and newspapers under the pseudonym "Boz." In 1836, his clippings were published in his first book, *Sketches by Boz*. Dickens' first success caught the eye of Catherine Hogarth, whom he soon married. Catherine and Charles produced 10 children before the couple separated.

In the same year that *Sketches by Boz* was released, Dickens started publishing *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*. His series of sketches were originally written as captions for humorous sports-themed illustrations, and were published “in parts” or as monthly serial installments. *The Pickwick Papers*, as they came to be known, were wildly popular with readers.

Dickens had also become publisher of a magazine called *Bentley's Miscellany*. In it he started publishing his first novel, *Oliver Twist*, which follows the life of an orphan living in the streets. The story was inspired by how Dickens felt as an impoverished child forced to get by on his own. Dickens continued showcasing *Oliver Twist* in the magazines he later edited, including *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, the latter of which he founded. The novel was extremely well received in both England and America. Dedicated readers of *Oliver Twist* couldn't wait to get their hands on the next monthly installment.

In 1842, Dickens and his wife, Kate, embarked on a five-month lecture tour of the United States, leaving their 10 children at home with friends. Upon their return, Dickens penned *American Notes for General Circulation*, a sarcastic travelogue criticizing American culture and materialism.

Over the next couple of years, Dickens published two Christmas stories. One was the classic *A Christmas Carol*, which features the timeless protagonist Ebenezer Scrooge, a curmudgeonly old miser, who, with the help of ghosts, finds the Christmas spirit.

During his first U.S. tour, in 1842, Dickens designated himself “The Inimitable” and became what many have deemed the first modern celebrity. His lectures were so widely attended that ticket scalpers gathered outside his events. It was said that during the tour, Dickens “had the greatest welcome that any visitor to America has ever had.”

In addition to his great talent as a writer, Dickens was also a consummate showman. He had nurtured his theatrical interest and abilities since he was a boy, and as a touring speaker his stage presence was astounding. He did

not just read from his works; he performed them with great ability and often had members of his audiences laughing, swooning, weeping, and displaying every emotion felt by his vivid characters.

“They flock around me as if I were an idol,” bragged Dickens, an immodest show-off. He enjoyed the attention at first, but he eventually resented the invasion of privacy. He was also annoyed by what he viewed as Americans’ gregariousness and crude habits, as he later expressed in *American Notes*.

In light of his criticism of the American people during his first tour, Dickens launched a second U.S. tour, from 1867 to 1868, hoping to set things right with the public. His 76 readings earned him no less than \$95,000, which, in the Victoria era, equaled approximately \$1.5 million today.

Back at home, Dickens had become so famous that people recognized him all over London as he strolled around the city making observations that would serve as inspiration for his future work.

From 1849 to 1850, Dickens worked on *David Copperfield*, the first work of its kind; no one had ever written a novel that simply followed a character through his everyday life. In writing it, Dickens tapped into his own personal experiences, from his difficult childhood to his work as a journalist. Although *David Copperfield* is not considered Dickens’ best work, it was his personal favorite. It also helped define the public’s expectations of a Dickensian novel.

During the 1850s, Dickens suffered two devastating losses: the deaths of his daughter and father. He also separated from his wife during that decade, the final result of his long-standing affair with Nelly Ternan. Consequently, his novels began to express his darkened worldview. *Bleak House* deals with the hypocrisy of British society. In *Hard Times*, Dickens focuses on the shortcomings of employers as well as those who seek change. Also among Dickens’ darker novels is *Little Dorrit*, a fictional study of how human values conflict with the world’s brutality.

Coming out of his “dark novel” period, in 1859 Dickens published *A Tale of Two Cities*, a historical novel that takes place during the French Revolution. He published it in a periodical he founded, *All the Year Round*. His next novel, *Great Expectations* (1860-1861), focuses on the boy Pip’s lifelong journey of moral development. It is widely considered his greatest literary accomplishment. In 1865, Dickens was in a train accident and never fully recovered. Despite his fragile condition, he continued to tour until 1870. On June 9, 1870, Dickens had a stroke and, at age 58, died at Gad’s Hill Place, his country home in Kent, England. He was buried in Poet’s Corner at Westminster Abbey, with thousands of mourners gathering at the beloved author’s gravesite.

Dickens, the father...

John Dickens was born to a manservant and a maid in the home of a landowning gentleman with estates in Cheshire and a townhouse in Mayfair. After John’s father died, his wife remained in service with the Crewe family and raised her two boys. John did not follow his parents into service; he was going to do better. Little is known of him in his teens – a friend of the Crewes secured for him a place in the Royal Navy Pay Office in Portsmouth when he was twenty. He performed well and was steadily promoted. By 1809, his salary was £110 and he was able to marry.

Dickens always found it difficult to manage on what he thought a meager income. The problem was not his income, but his expensive tastes. He liked good wine, books, gambling, and the society of men who could afford to live well. He liked to dress well and entertain friends (whom he might later ask for a loan.)

Soon his debts had become so severe that all the household goods were sold in an attempt to pay his bills. Charles described his father as "a jovial opportunist with no money sense." Soon, he was unable to pay his creditors and was imprisoned for debt where his wife and the three younger children joined him.

Some years later John Dickens was again briefly imprisoned for debt, and was released only when his son Charles borrowed money from his friends

based on the security of his salary. However, on his release from prison John Dickens immediately wrote begging letters to those same friends of Charles also asking for money.

The more Charles succeeded in his literary efforts, the more his father annoyed him with requests for loans or even signing bills for his son to pay. In desperation, Charles leased a house and moved his parents to Devon, far from London and far from temptation. That worked for a while, but John moved back.

While John Dickens seemed to care little for his sons' educational needs, being much more focused on his own pretentious lifestyle, Charles' mother was a good influence in this regard. She taught him his letters early on and encouraged his reading, enabling him to embark on his own crash course of studies through his fathers' library of books next to his little bedroom. Years later a former nurse described him as "a terrible boy to read" and Mrs. Dickens as "a dear good mother."

To John Dickens credit, he acquired true ambition and responsibility later in life. After taking retirement from the Navy Pay Office, he worked as a reporter as Charles had done in the beginning, rising to be put in charge of the other reporters. By age sixty he had become a popular and respected figure in Fleet Street. Although Charles finally came to be proud of his father, John Dickens was nevertheless immortalized in *David Copperfield* as the pattern for Wilkins Micawber, the neer-do-well who was always hoping that "something will turn up."

Conclusion

All three of these fathers exhibited great selfishness centered on their own lives and problems, often unaware or ignoring the needs of their sons. Yet all three sons overcame such obstacles as poor education, poor parenting, and even cruel treatment and achieved greatness.

Why?