

NOVEL DOSSIER

Fixed Period

Anthony Trollope · 2001

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Metadata

Title	Fixed Period
Author	Anthony Trollope
First published	2001
Known editions	38
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Plot & themes

A note on publication: "The Fixed Period" was first published in 1882, serialized in Blackwood's Magazine. Open Library's 2001 date reflects a reprint, not the original publication.

"The Fixed Period" is one of Trollope's most unusual works — a dystopian satire set in the fictional republic of Britannula, a former British colony in the South Pacific, sometime in the late 1970s. The premise is blunt and unsettling: the republic has passed a law requiring citizens to enter a state "college" upon reaching the age of sixty-seven, where they will spend a final year before being euthanized, sparing society the burden of aged and infirm members.

The narrator is John Neverbend, the republic's fervent president and the chief architect of the Fixed Period law. He believes with complete sincerity that his scheme is rational, humane, and progressive — a gift to civilization. His driving characteristic is ideological certainty, and Trollope uses him to explore how abstract principle can become monstrous when divorced from human feeling.

The central tension emerges when the law's first practical test arrives and Neverbend must actually apply it to a real person — a friend. The novel examines the gap between utopian theory and lived human consequence, and quietly asks whether societies that optimize for efficiency can remain societies at all.

Trollope also threads in satire of political self-importance, colonial identity, and the enthusiasm with which reformers embrace ideas they have never had to live by.

How it ends: Britain intervenes, dispatching a warship to suspend Britannula's experiment and reassert imperial authority. Neverbend is removed from power and effectively exiled to England, where his grand scheme is rendered moot. The Fixed Period law is never carried out. Trollope leaves the conclusion deliberately ambiguous in tone — Neverbend never recants, maintaining his belief that history will vindicate him, which gives the ending a tragicomic, deeply ironic quality.

Narrative craft

A note on dates: Open Library lists 2001, but "The Fixed Period" was first published in 1882, serialized in Blackwood's Magazine and then issued in book form. The 2001 date almost certainly reflects a modern reprint or edition.

The novel is narrated in the first person by its protagonist, John Neverbend, the president of the

fictional island republic of Britannula. This is a crucial craft choice: Neverbend is a true believer in his own cause — a law mandating euthanasia at age 67 — and his sincerity is absolute. Trollope gives him no ironic self-awareness, which means the irony falls entirely on the reader. We hear a passionate, logical, occasionally pompous voice defending something most readers find monstrous, and the comedy and horror arise from that gap.

The structure is compact by Trollope's standards — a short novel, closer to a novella, without the sprawling subplots of his *Barsetshire* or *Palliser* books. The timeline is essentially linear, following the crisis as Neverbend attempts to deposit the first citizen into the college that will house him before his prescribed death.

The prose is plainer and more satirical than Trollope's social novels. Sentences are direct; the register shifts between earnest political argument and dry comedy. Trollope also seeds the narrative with near-future technology — cricket played with steam-powered bowlers, references to intercontinental communication — giving the book a speculative, science-fiction texture unusual for him.

Pacing is brisk. The compressed length keeps pressure on the central dilemma. The technique the novel is best known for is its sustained single-perspective irony: Trollope never breaks Neverbend's voice to wink at the reader, trusting the reader to see what the narrator cannot.

Historical context

The Open Library date of 2001 is almost certainly a reprint date. *Fixed Period* was first published in 1882, serialised in *Blackwood's Magazine* and then issued in two volumes. This is one of the best-documented facts about the novel, and the 1882 date should be used.

Fixed Period belongs to the very last phase of Trollope's life. He wrote it in 1881 and it appeared in the final year before his death in December 1882. By that point he had produced well over forty novels and was regarded by the reading public as a reliable, even stolid, chronicler of English clerical and political life. *Fixed Period* was a sharp departure from that reputation.

The novel is set in the 1980s — a full century ahead of its composition — on a fictional island colony called Britannula that has recently gained independence from Britain. The premise is a state-mandated euthanasia law requiring citizens to enter a "college" at the age of 67 and be put to death a year later. The satirical target is utilitarian social philosophy, particularly the strand descended from Jeremy Bentham and popularised in various Victorian reform movements that calculated human welfare in aggregate, sometimes chillingly. Trollope was in his mid-sixties when he wrote it, acutely conscious of old age and its indignities.

The 1880s context matters in other ways. Debates about colonial self-governance were intensifying, and anxieties about scientific rationalism reshaping morality were widespread. The novel also includes steam-powered technology and other near-future details, placing it unusually close to science fiction for a Victorian realist.

Readers and critics found it uncomfortable, and it received a mixed reception. It has since attracted renewed interest precisely because its central dilemma feels less remote than Trollope's

contemporaries might have hoped.

Publication & reception

The Fixed Period was first published in 1882, serialised in Blackwood's Magazine from October 1881 through March 1882, before appearing in book form. Trollope wrote it in 1880, making it one of his final completed novels; he died in December 1882, the same year it reached readers in volume form.

The book was not warmly received. Victorian critics and readers found its central premise — a fictional state that legislates euthanasia for citizens reaching a fixed age — unsettling and tonally strange. Coming from Trollope, whose reputation rested on the comfortable social realism of the Barsetshire and Palliser novels, the satirical science fiction of The Fixed Period struck many as an odd departure. Some reviewers were simply baffled; others read it as the morbid preoccupation of an ageing man confronting his own mortality, Trollope being in his mid-sixties and in declining health when he wrote it.

Commercially it was a minor work, generating little of the sustained interest that his major novels attracted. It was not singled out for prizes or prolonged critical controversy, and it faded into relative obscurity for most of the following century.

Its reputation has recovered somewhat in more recent decades. Scholars interested in Victorian attitudes toward ageing, eugenics, and utopian fiction have returned to it as a genuinely curious and prescient text. The Open Library records a 2001 publication date, which most likely reflects a modern scholarly reprint or edition rather than a first publication, as the novel's original appearance was clearly in 1882. That later edition signals the modest but real scholarly rehabilitation the book has undergone, appearing on course syllabi and in academic discussions of Trollope's range as a writer.

Editions & adaptations

The Fixed Period, Trollope's late dystopian novella set in a fictional future commonwealth practicing compulsory euthanasia at age 67, was first published in 1882 by Blackwood and Sons, serialized in Blackwood's Magazine. Long overshadowed by his Barsetshire and Palliser novels, it gained renewed scholarly interest in the twentieth century as a proto-science-fiction curiosity and was reissued in several annotated and critical editions that restored its reputation as a darkly satirical meditation on aging and social policy.

- The Fixed Period (Blackwood and Sons (first edition), 1882) — First book edition, published by William Blackwood and Sons, Edinburgh and London, following serialization in Blackwood's Magazine 1881–82.
- The Fixed Period (Oxford University Press / Oxford World's Classics, 1993) — Oxford World's Classics edition with scholarly introduction, the edition most responsible for bringing the novel to modern academic readers.
- The Fixed Period (Broadview Press, 2008) — Broadview critical edition with contextual

appendices on Victorian debates about aging, euthanasia, and utopian fiction, widely used in university courses.

Influence & legacy

The Fixed Period was actually first published in 1882, serialised in Blackwood's Magazine — the Open Library date of 2001 almost certainly reflects a modern reprint or critical edition rather than the original publication, and the true date should be noted accordingly.

Trollope's late novella occupies a curious place in literary history: largely ignored during his long Victorian reputation, it has attracted steadily growing scholarly attention as readers have recognised how sharply it anticipates twentieth-century debates about euthanasia, state power over the body, and enforced retirement. In this sense its influence has been less on individual writers than on a discourse — the bioethical conversation about mandatory death that would later preoccupy thinkers and novelists across the following century.

The book is sometimes placed alongside other Victorian speculative fictions — Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872) being the closest comparison — as an early experiment in satirical utopian writing from a mainstream novelist rather than a genre outsider. Critics who study the prehistory of dystopian fiction frequently cite it alongside H. G. Wells's later work, noting that Trollope got there first in important respects.

Its canonical standing remains modest but real. It does not appear on general "great novels" lists, but it features regularly on syllabi devoted to Victorian science fiction, bioethics in literature, and late Trollope. The publication of scholarly editions in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries — which likely explains the 2001 Open Library date — signals renewed academic seriousness.

Today *The Fixed Period* is probably Trollope's most discussed work among readers interested in the politics of ageing and death, topics that have only grown more urgent. Its reputation is quietly rising, even if it remains far from his popular novels.