**William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863)**

**By Professor Carolyn Oulton**

‘the pleasantest greenest place in the world, pleasant woods close at hand, fields on the other side very quiet and happy to walk in’.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Thackeray on Southborough, near Tunbridge Wells.

Educated at Charterhouse and Cambridge, W. M. Thackeray is remembered by many as the author of *Vanity Fair* (1847) and by some for suggesting that it takes three generations to make a gentleman. He was born in India in 1811, returning to England at the age of 5. As a securely upper-middle class child, he enjoyed a childhood holiday in fashionable Tunbridge Wells in 1823,[[2]](#footnote-2) just after his near contemporary [Dickens](/dickens), had begun his downward trajectory following the loss of his [father’s](/dickens/dickens-chatham) job at [Chatham Dockyard](/19c/19c-chatham-dockyard).

Thackeray married Isabella Shawe in 1836. Their first child Anne (Annie) was born in 1837 and later became a successful novelist in her own right. Jane, born in 1838, survived only eight months, and Thackeray’s strained description of ‘gadding to [Gravesend](/19c/19c-gravesend)’[[3]](#footnote-3) with Isabella in the spring of 1839 was clearly intended to reassure his mother that they were coping. Harriet Marian, born in 1840 and known as Minnie, would become the first wife of Leslie Stephen (later the father of Virginia Woolf).

In the summer of 1840 Thackeray and his young family spent three weeks at 1 Bridge Terrace in [Margate](/19c/19c-margate),[[4]](#footnote-4) where he wrote \_*A Shabby Genteel Story\_*, about a libertine who tricks a naïve young woman into a false marriage. The teasing narrative voice plays on readers’ desire for gossip:

Up to this point, I say, I have had a right to accompany the fat lady and Miss Runt; but whether, on arriving at Mr Fincham’s, they turned to the left, in the direction of the Royal Hotel, or to the right, by the beach, the bathing-machines, and queer rickety old row of houses, called Buenos Ayres, no power on earth shall induce me to say; suffice it, they went to Mrs Gann’s. why should we set all the world gadding to a particular street, to know where that lady lives?[[5]](#footnote-5)

But while the town was a thriving resort in the 1840s, Ushashi Dasgupta comments that ‘Thackeray’s Margate feels wrong from the very beginning’,[[6]](#footnote-6) and as readers have noted, the story ends somewhat abruptly. The reason is that Isabella started to show alarming signs of madness. Many years later Annie told her father that on her mother had attempted to drown her in the sea in a moment of mental aberration.[[7]](#footnote-7)

It soon became too difficult to look after Isabella at home, and a letter of 1842 sees Thackeray living apart from his wife and seeking solace in memories of his own childhood. On a working holiday in Southborough, near Tunbridge Wells, he enthused to his mother about ‘the pleasantest greenest place in the world, pleasant woods close at hand, fields on the other side very quiet and happy to walk in’. Sadly the cottage where they had stayed in Tunbridge Wells twenty years before had ‘gone to heaven’.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Thackeray satirises 18th century Tunbridge Wells in \_*The Virginians\_*, set around 30 years before [Jane Austen](/austen/austen-tunbridge-wells) described its ‘long ascent, half rock, half sand’;[[9]](#footnote-9) as a first response to the news of a family mésalliance, one character ‘had fits and ran off to the solitude of her dear rocks at Tunbridge Wells, where she did not see above forty people of a night at cards.’[[10]](#footnote-10) But his regret is palpable in ‘Tunbridge Toys’, an article written towards the end of his life. ‘As I look up from my desk, I see Tunbridge Wells Common and the rocks, the strange familiar place which I remember forty years ago.’[[11]](#footnote-11) Readers surely empathise with the middle-aged author when, like [Dickens](/dickens) revisiting the [Rochester](/dickens/dickens-medway) of his own childhood, he finds that everything has changed and the place no longer knows him.

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1. To Mrs Henry Carmichael-Smyth. 11? June 1842. 100 – 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Taylor 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. To Mrs Henry Carmichael-Smyth. March 1839. Harden 46-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. To Mrs Henry Carmichael-Smyth. 20-21 August 1840. Harden 67-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. \_A Shabby Genteel Story’ 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dasgupta 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Taylor 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. To Mrs Henry Carmichael-Smyth. 11? June 1842. 100 – 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. [\_Sanditon\_]( https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Page:Austen\_Sanditon\_and\_other\_miscellanea.djvu/31) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. [\_The Virginians\_](<https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.207951/mode/2up?q=%22had+fits+and+ran+off+to+the+solitude+of+her%22>) 741. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. ‘Tunbridge Toys’ 316. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)