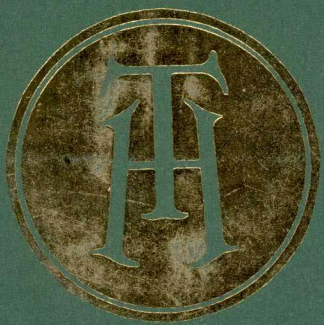
Thomas Hardy



A PAIR OF BLUE EYES

THE NEW WESSEX EDITION

General Editor P. N. Furbank

Desperate Remedies
Introduction by C. J. P. Beatty

Far from the Madding Crowd
Introduction by John Bayley

The Hand of Ethelberta
Introduction by Robert Gittings

Jude the Obscure
Introduction by Terry Eagleton

A Laodicean
Introduction by Barbara Hardy

The Mayor of Casterbridge
Introduction by Ian Gregor

A Pair of Blue Eyes
Introduction by Ronald Blythe

The Return of the Native
Introduction by Derwent May

Tess of the d'Urbervilles
Introduction by P. N. Furbank

The Trumpet-Major
Introduction by Barbara Hardy

Two on a Tower
Introduction by F. B. Pinion

Under the Greenwood Tree
Introduction by Geoffrey Grigson

The Well-Beloved
Introduction by J. Hillis Miller

The Woodlanders
Introduction by David Lodge

THE NEW WESSEX EDITION

A Pair of Blue Eyes

THOMAS HARDY

INTRODUCTION BY

Ronald Blythe

'A violet in the youth of primy nature,
Forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting,
The perfume and suppliance of a minute;
No more.'

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CO-ORDINATING EDITORS
Caroline Hobhouse
Edward Leeson

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Biography

1840 Hardy born at Higher Bockhampton, near Dorchester. His father and grandfather were master-stonemasons, also keen performers in the band or 'quire' of the local parish church.

1848 Attended school established by his local patroness Julia Augusta Martin. About this time his mother gave him Dryden's *Virgil*, *Rasselas* and *Paul and Virginia*.

1849 Transferred to school in Dorchester. Played fiddle at local weddings and dances.

1856–61 Articled to Dorchester architect John Hicks. Studied Latin and Greek from five to eight in the morning. Began writing verse. Was introduced to modern thought by his friend Horace Moule, son of the Vicar of Fordington.

1862–7 In London, working for the architect Arthur Blomfield. Read widely; studied paintings in National Gallery; became an agnostic.

1867–70 Returned to Dorset for health reasons and was employed by Hicks, and his successor Crickmay, on church restoration.

1868 Completed draft of first novel, 'The Poor Man and the Lady' (later destroyed).

1870 Sent by Crickmay to St Juliot in Cornwall and met future wife Emma Lavinia Gifford. Writing *Desperate Remedies*, his first published novel.

1873 Invited by Leslie Stephen to contribute serial (*Far from the Madding Crowd*) to *Cornhill*.

1874 Married and took rooms in Surbiton.

1876–8 Living at Sturminster Newton; writing *The Return of the Native*.

1878–81 Living in London. Was becoming well known in literary circles. Had serious illness while writing *A Laodicean*.

1881 Took house at Wimborne Minster.

1883 Went to live in Dorchester.

1885 Moved into the house, Max Gate, in Dorchester, which he had built for himself. He and his wife continued to make long annual visits to London.

1888–91 Writing many short stories. Publication of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* in 1891 created furore.

1892 His father died.

1892–4 Worsening relations with his wife, the trouble being exacerbated by the writing of *Jude the Obscure*. In 1893 they visited Dublin and met Mrs Henniker, with whom he collaborated on a short story and perhaps fell in love.

1895–6 Publication of *Jude* causes scandal. He resolved to give up novel-writing.

1897–8 Writing and revising poems for his first collection, *Wessex Poems*.

1902 Began *The Dynasts*.

1904 His mother died.

1910 Received the Order of Merit.

1912 Making final revision of the Wessex novels. His wife died in November.

1913 In March made penitential pilgrimage to St Juliot and later to his wife's birthplace, Plymouth. Wrote flood of poems 'in expiation'.

1914 Married Florence Dugdale. At outbreak of war joined group of writers pledged to write for the Allied Cause.

1914–28 Wrote and revised the material for several more collections of verse.

1928 Died. His ashes were buried in Westminster Abbey and his heart in his first wife's grave in Stinsford churchyard.

Hardy's Major Works

with year of book publication

1871 Desperate Remedies
1872 Under the Greenwood Tree
1873 A Pair of Blue Eyes
1874 Far from the Madding Crowd
1876 The Hand of Ethelberta
1878 The Return of the Native
1880 The Trumpet-Major
1881 A Laodicean
1882 Two on a Tower
1886 The Mayor of Casterbridge
1887 The Woodlanders
1888 Wessex Tales
1891 A Group of Noble Dames
1891 Tess of the d'Urbervilles
1894 Life's Little Ironies
1896 [1895] Jude the Obscure
1897 The Well-Beloved
1898 Wessex Poems
1902 Poems of the Past and the Present
1903 The Dynasts, pt 1
1905 The Dynasts, pt 2
1908 The Dynasts, pt 3
1909 Time's Laughingstocks
1913 A Changed Man and Other Tales
1914 Satires of Circumstance
1917 Moments of Vision
1922 Late Lyrics and Earlier
1923 The Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall
1925 Human Shows
1928 Winter Words
1952 Our Exploits at West Poley

Acknowledgements

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P. N. FURBANK

Introduction

On Monday, 7 March 1870 Thomas Hardy, who was then staying with his parents at Bockhampton, rose very early in the morning and set out while it was still starlight for Cornwall. It was to be the most significant journey he was ever to make. He was twenty-nine. A few days before he had finished his second novel *Desperate Remedies* and sent it off to Alexander Macmillan, who was to reject it. His first novel, 'The Poor Man and the Lady', also turned down, lay in a drawer. Apart from these creations his writings to date consisted of poems which would not be published until many years later and a light-hearted essay in *Chambers's Journal* entitled 'How I Built Myself a House'. Yet in spite of the tenuous nature of such a claim at such a time, and in spite of a common sense which resigned him to architecture as a livelihood, he had inwardly moved to a position which committed him to literature. Thus it was the manuscript of a poem, and not the plan for restoring the parish church, which was observed jutting from his pocket when he arrived at St Juliot Rectory, Boscastle, between six and seven that evening.

A woman of his own age dressed in brown welcomed him, and from that moment there proceeded emotions, events and imaginings which were to culminate in one of the major sequences of love poetry in the English language, and in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, the first novel by Hardy to carry his name. It was a book whose autobiographical element was to provide much intrigue and speculation, and was greater than he cared to admit. Unlike the magnificent love-remembered poems of 1912, the transmuting forces of time are absent in this story. It was written while the experiences and thoughts which suggested it were happening to him in the most intimate personal sense. His method of artistically coping with his own courtship, his spiritual universe from which a benign creator had been deposed and the invasion of rural insularity by disturbing new elements belonged more to the sphere of the poet than to that of the novelist, and his early readers were swift to see it. Coventry Patmore, reading the newly published *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, 'regretted

at almost every page that such unequalled beauty and power should not have assured themselves the immortality which would have been impressed upon them by the form of verse', and Tennyson was enthralled by its poetic conception and, later, confessed to Hardy that he liked it the best of all his novels.

In 1877 Hardy wrote in his notebook, 'The ultimate aim of the poet should be to touch our hearts by showing his own,' and this final personal intention pervades the sad story of Elfride. It is a fragile work but not a slight one. In many ways it is surprisingly advanced, for, although all its characters announce themselves in stereotyped 1860s fashion, they soon break through the convention of mid-Victorian fiction and emerge as moderns, with their uncomfortable semi-awareness of confused genders. A further fascination is felt when it is perceived that these characters and their landscape – one of 'those sequestered spots outside the Gates of the World' – both belong to the most important experiences of Hardy's youth. The novel attracted a special kind of attention and admiration from the start. Forty years later Hardy was still defensive about it. In 1913 he informed a correspondent, 'It is very strange that you should have been attracted by *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. The character of the heroine is somewhat – indeed, rather largely – that of my late wife, and the background of the tale the place where she lived. But of course the adventures, loves, etc., are fictitious entirely, though people used sometimes to ask her why she did this and that.'[1]

Proust, a great reader of Hardy, said of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* that it was 'of all books the one he would himself most gladly have written'. Its picture of individuals nervously exploring private emotional thresholds which they either cannot wholly comprehend or accept allows the reader an uncommon amount of personal interpretation. Although it is constructed with the characteristic mesh of plot and sub-plot which typifies all of Hardy's fiction, there is in this fresh morning work only a suggestion of the imperious tragic philosophy which was to dominate future novels. What occurs at Endelstow is poignant to an unforgettable degree, yet it is but a lead up to those 'dramas of grandeur and unity truly Sophoclean [which] are enacted in the real, by virtue of the concentrated passions and closely-knit interdependence on the lives therein', as Hardy described the subjects of his mature period. The celebrated irony, however, is immediately recognisable. Humanity as time's laughingstock has made its entrance. Human order is derisively measured against some

[1] Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy: his career as a novelist* (1971).

hollow cosmic disorder. The fate of lovers is made infinitely more melancholy when its trivial connection with the vast unfeeling forces called Nature is exposed. These forces are given a precise geographical location in the shape of the immense, beautiful and frightening north Cornish seaboard, so that the heroine is seen on both an actual and a symbolic cliff-edge. The pounding Atlantic mocks her heartbeat. 'At Beeny Cliff . . .' wrote Hardy in his notebook in 1872,

> green towards the land, blue-black towards the sea. Every ledge has a little, starred, green grass upon it: all vertical parts bare. . . . The sea is full of motion internally, but still as a whole. Quiet and silent in the distance, noisy and restless close at hand.

Forty years later, after his wife's death, the cliff's edge balances an old happiness –

> The woman now is – elsewhere – whom the ambling pony bore,
> And nor knows nor cares for Beeny, and will laugh there nevermore.

Elfride and the boy architect who makes his descent upon her father's parish are a decade younger than Hardy and Emma Gifford when they first met at St Juliot. This immaturity is the key to the novel. Elfride knows little about herself and nothing about men, but she has no reason to think that intelligence and instinct will not tell her plenty about both in due time. She is not ambitious and she lacks the type of self-dramatisation which sees herself as a storm centre. Such fantasies are reserved for her pen, for, like Emma Gifford, she is writing a romance.[1] Elfride, in fact, is rather ordinary and a bit gauche, easily impressed and has 'special facilities for getting rid of trouble after a decent interval and is shocked when she finds out how many people cling to their misery'. Suitors besiege her. She expects them to know what they are about. But their movements are tentative and unsure, and they push her into making bad mistakes. In spite of their essential weakness, the egotism of these very different young men involves them in a great deal more action than the circumstances really warrant and none of them stops to ask himself if his violence or self-concern is endangering the girl.

Unsuspecting and entirely vulnerable, Elfride has gradually to learn that hers is not a happy destiny. She tells a friend that she asks

[1] See Emma Hardy, *Some Recollections*, ed. Evelyn Hardy and Robert Gittings (1961) p. 90, for details of Emma Hardy's unpublished novel 'The Maid on the Shore'.

very little of life and that she is 'content to build happiness on any accidental basis that may lie near at hand', but the irony remains that there is not one single accidental factor pointing to happiness connected with her existence. All things work together for ill. For what purpose? No one can say. She is 'unlucky', that is all. Some people are. Instead of her successes and mistakes merging into a tolerable if flawed entity, which is the common lot, bit by bit everything goes wrong for her and she is left with nothing to cling to. The stars are not to blame. They and the huge seas, rocks and winds among which she has always lived know nothing about her. It is vanity to imagine that she is even the lowly component of a vast creation which needs her and is aware of her. Others as well as Hardy had at this moment arrived at a state of black disbelief in the benign intentions of the cosmos. Richard Jefferies continued to worship terrestrial glory and to give himself up to the ecstasies of the physical world but, in *The Story of My Heart*, he admitted: 'there is nothing human in nature. The earth, though loved so dearly, would let me perish on the ground, and neither bring forth food nor water. Burning in the sky the great sun, of whose company I have been so fond, would merely burn on and make no motion to assist me.... The trees care nothing for us; the hill I visited so often in days gone by has not missed me.... If the entire human race perished at this hour, what difference would it make to the earth?' If a man falls from a cliff 'the air parts: the earth beneath dashes him to pieces'. Nature has no special concern for humanity. Worse. Science has destroyed the old protection. The safety-net of the Everlasting Arms is no longer trustworthy. Elfride Swancourt slips towards the abyss, her fate entirely unseen by those who insist that they love her.

These are Felix Jethway, Stephen Smith, Henry Knight and Spenser Luxellian. The first, after a single attempt to kiss her, dies because he seems to have convinced himself that Elfride is beyond his reach. The second is direct, attractive and able to delight her – until the realities of life demonstrate that he is as much a child as she is and in no position to become her husband. The third, who is the eldest of the suitors by several years, has a problem where women are concerned. Elfride is dazzled by his intellectual qualities but is bothered by him in other respects and complains, 'I almost wish you were of a grosser nature, Harry.' The fourth lover, Lord Luxellian, her kinsman and a young widower still in his twenties, marries her and makes her pregnant. She dies of a miscarriage only five months

after her wedding-day. The inexorable progress from the time when she was free as a bird and, like Emma Gifford, Hardy's own rectory girl, 'scampering up and down the hills on my beloved mare alone, wanting no protection, the rain going down my back often, and my hair floating on the wind,'[1] to her Shakespearian descent into the Luxellian family vault occupies less than five years. The four lovers – each in his own unwitting way – have driven her into the dark. Or have they?

The plot of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* is really the basis of a poem. It is composed of symbols and metaphor, and even where it is luridly invaded by melodrama it retains the power of poetry. Hardy has had to invent a special kind of story-telling to carry the multiplicity of his private experience which has not as yet provided the moral philosophy which he used to control his later novels. It is a book which contains many of the impulses and much of the emotion of a tragic ballad.

An exceedingly handsome boy arrives at a dull country rectory with instructions from his employer, a London architect, to draw up plans for 'restoring' the parish church. He stays at the rectory with the latitudinarian Mr Swancourt and falls in love with his daughter Elfride. The rector allows the friendship, believing that Stephen and Elfride are too young for seriousness, and then finds out that this person is not at all the well-bred, educated man which everything about him implies, but the son of one of his humble parishioners, Smith the mason. More nonplussed than angry, Mr Swancourt forbids further contact between the pair. Thrillingly caught up in first love, they elope to Plymouth, intending to get married, but an inefficiency on Stephen's part concerning the licence forces them to travel on to London for the ceremony. There they panic. 'I don't like it here – nor myself – nor you!' says Elfride on Paddington Station, her faith in Stephen as protector quite vanished. They scramble back to Cornwall on the very next train. The entire escapade has been muddled and innocent, but Elfride is terrified that somebody from Endelstow will have seen her and conclude otherwise. She has indeed been observed (village cognisance) and by none other than Mrs Jethway, the vengeance-seeking mother of her first admirer.

When Elfride reaches the rectory it is to find that her father has chosen that very time for his secret marriage to their neighbour, the rich Mrs Troyton. The new Mrs Swancourt launches the girl upon

[1] *Some Recollections*, pp. 50–1.

the London Season and for a few weeks the parochial matters of Endelstow seem of small account. When her stepmother's famous relative, the essayist and critic Henry Knight, accepts an invitation to Cornwall, life seems to be opening up for Elfride. Knight is in his early thirties and highly sophisticated. Elfride is first awed by him, then dazzled. He has had a long and influential friendship with a lad from the very village he is now visiting, but only once, in a generalised way, does he make reference to him. This is in striking contrast to the hero-worshipping outpourings which Elfride has had to endure when Stephen tells her about Knight, and which ironically lay the foundations of her own admiration for the writer. Class partly prevents Knight from discussing someone like Stephen with a lady. From the first, instinct tells Elfride that Knight will either despise or forsake her if she tells him about the youth. Knight, however, will not allow Elfride any kind of reticence and demands to know all about her life before he entered it. Profoundly in love with the writer by now, she is alerted to the danger of her situation. For she has learned an unpleasant but unalterable fact about Knight – that he must have, in his own morbid phrase, 'untried lips'. His questioning of her on her sexual experience exposes far more of his own pathology than Elfride's guilt. The only lull in this questioning occurs when the pair of them are involved in a life-or-death struggle on the Cliff without a Name, when Elfride strips herself in order to save this virgin male from destruction. The scene, one of Hardy's greatest, magnificently combines thought and action.

After the rescue it seems that Knight must accept Elfride for what she is, and not force her to measure up to the fantasy he has about women. But he cannot. Grateful though he is, he cannot even bring himself to kiss her after she has saved his life. His 'peculiarity of nature' prevents him from doing so. There is a curious justice in his not doing so because, unknown to him, Elfride had gone to the cliff in the first place to watch a ship arrive carrying Stephen back from India. After the elopement débâcle, the boy had fled abroad to become the man, and to prove himself capable of supporting a wife. Part of the proof, a banker's receipt for £200, is concealed in Elfride's dress. But it is all of no avail, for Stephen has shrunk into insignificance in comparison with Knight. And so, a few days later, the young architect discovers that the girl whom he has been addressing as 'wife' in confident letters, and for whose sake he has worked so hard, is deeply in love with none other than his adored friend.

Soon afterwards, the three meet during one of the funeral

episodes which are strung out like dark pendants along the whole length of the story. Stephen's father is preparing the vault to receive Lady Luxellian, and Stephen himself is in the tomb writing in a notebook when Elfride and Knight suddenly appear. Knight is patronising and doesn't at first introduce 'a lady betrothed to himself' to the mason's son; and Stephen, though bewildered and hurt, tactfully says little. He is shortly returning to India, he informs them. 'The scene was remembered by all three as an indelible mark in their history.' Each has been privately lacerated because 'the deed of deception was complete'.

Immediately afterwards, Knight renews his probing into Elfride's history – 'You don't tell me anything but what I wring out of you.' She breaks under his interrogation, her strength undermined by threatening letters from Mrs Jethway. Elfride and Knight are actually resting on Felix Jethway's grave when the truth is dragged out of her. While the reader knows how essentially innocent she is, it is possible to understand something of both Mrs Jethway's and Knight's point of view. It is also plain that Knight rejects her more out of terror at having to cope, as he thinks, with an experienced woman than because she might be scandalous. Disturbed by her openly loving nature – it permeates the novel with an irresistible sweetness – and more scared than shocked that she can compare his response to it with that of previous lovers, he abandons her, though not before offering prim advice. Desperately in love, Elfride rushes to London after him and pours out her pent-up criticism of his sexual timidity – 'O, could *I* but be the man and *you* the woman. How I wish you could have run away with twenty women before you knew me. . . .' Knight flees from such emotional involvement to the Continent. His 'was a robust intellect, which would escape outside the atmosphere of heart . . .'. The psychological insight into the nature of an intellectual is a memorable feature of the novel.

Some considerable time later Stephen and Knight accidentally run into each other in London. The former has done meteorically well in India and has become an architect of fame and promise. He is also no longer a boy but a man, and Knight's cool attitude towards him reflects the development. It is as if maturity puts an end to any type of relationship which he can accept. He only displays an unflattering relief upon hearing who was Elfride's earlier lover. It was 'only Stephen'. What kind of rival was that! Immediately, and with no sense of how he has insulted her, Knight sets off for Cornwall to make her his wife, the meeting with Stephen having