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THOMAS HARDY

by Norman Page

Thomas Hardy



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Preface

Books on Hardy are legion. The first of them, Lionel Johnson's still readable study, appeared in 1894, more than thirty years before its subject's death; and since then Hardy criticism has established itself as a growth industry. In our own time, every year produces an impressive – or, from another point of view, daunting – quota of books and articles, editions and casebooks, monographs, notes and queries and dissertations. My justification for venturing to add to their number is, I believe, twofold. First, most studies of Hardy concern themselves with only a portion of his total *œuvre*: among recent major critics, for example, Ian Gregor and Michael Millgate have limited their field of reference to the fiction, whilst others have been mainly interested in Hardy the poet. The sheer bulk of Hardy's work in prose and verse makes such decisions understandable; but his unusual position as a major poet who was also a major novelist (to put the emphasis where he would have put it, and where it is increasingly being put by contemporary critics) seems to demand a more comprehensive treatment, even if inclusiveness has to be purchased at the price of a measure of superficiality. In this book, therefore, I have tried to give some account not only of Hardy's major novels and of his poems, but also of his minor novels and short stories, his autobiography, his essays, letters, notebooks, and other miscellaneous writings – to offer, in fact, to the reader or student who may be unfamiliar with the full range of his achievement a map of the whole area, the by-ways as well as the major landmarks. Without insisting that all the literary productions, public and private, of his long lifetime constitute a seamless garment, or that they are all of equal interest and value (which is certainly not the case), I would maintain that they are all stamped with his highly idiosyncratic personality, and that an understanding of each area can help to illuminate the others. Hardy himself would not, I think, have disagreed with this claim; in an unpublished fragment found among his papers

after his death, and quoted elsewhere in this volume, he urged that his writings, of which 'the last line' was his own death, be judged as a whole – be regarded, as it were, as constituting a single enormous volume written over a period of more than six decades.

Second, and arising naturally from what has just been said, in writing this study I have been able to make use of material, much of it still unpublished or in process of publication, which contributes to an understanding of Hardy but which has not usually been taken into account by previous critics. It seems likely that the late 1970s will prove to be a very important period in Hardy scholarship, and that materials which have hitherto been accessible only to a small number of students will soon become widely available, partly thanks to the emergence of Hardy's works from British copyright in 1978. Within the next few years, we can expect to see editions of Hardy's letters, notebooks and diaries, as well as important new editions of his novels and poems. (Details of some of these projects are given in the Bibliographical Notes at the end of this volume.) I have myself examined a large proportion of the material in question, as well as most of Hardy's surviving literary manuscripts, on which a great deal of further research needs to be done; and my discussion of his work utilizes some of the observations and conclusions derived from this study.

The Bibliographical Notes serve both to acknowledge some of the main published sources to which I am indebted, and to furnish the reader with a minimal guide to further works of Hardy scholarship and criticism. I have also given some account of important collections of Hardy material, published and unpublished, and of significant work in progress.

My discussion of Hardy's short stories has already appeared, in a slightly different form, in *Studies in Short Fiction* (vol. II, Winter 1974), and is here used by kind permission of the editor. A small portion of Chapter 2 has already been published in *Etudes Anglaises* (vol. 25 (1972), pp. 486–92, Paris, Librairie Didier), and is reprinted by kind permission of the editor of that journal. Some other passages in Chapters 2 and 6 are taken from a series of lectures titled 'Thomas Hardy: Fact and Problems', which I delivered at the University of Alberta in February 1975; my thanks are due to the Department of English, whose invitation to deliver the annual Broadus Lectures stimulated me to think and write about certain aspects of Hardy. The Canada Council have generously assisted my researches by making grants which enabled me to spend a good deal of time in England in 1973 and 1975. The Curator and staff of the Dorset County Museum,

Dorchester, showed unfailing patience and helpfulness on my numerous visits to the Thomas Hardy Memorial Collection housed there. Finally, I should like to record my gratitude to the many individual scholars with whom I have had the opportunity of discussing Hardy, and especially to those who have given me information concerning their own work in progress.

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Contents

Preface	ix
Acknowledgments	xiii
1 Life and Career	I
2 Major Novels	34
3 Minor Novels	90
4 Short Stories	121
5 Non-fictional Prose	131
6 Verse	154
The Works of Thomas Hardy: A Select List	184
Bibliographical Notes	187
Index	191

I

Life and Career

HARDY, Thomas, author; O.M. 1910; Hon. LL.D. Aberdeen; Litt.D. Cambridge and D.Litt. Oxford; LL.D. St. Andrews and Bristol; Hon. Fellow Magdalene College, Cambridge, and Queen's College, Oxford; J.P. Dorset; *b.* Dorsetshire, 2 June 1840; *s.* of late Thomas and Jemima Hardy; *m.* 1st, 1874, Emma Lavinia (*d.* 1912), *d.* of J. A. Gifford, and *niece* of Archdn. Gifford; 2nd, 1914, Florence Emily, J.P. for Dorchester, *d.* of Edward Dugdale, and author of numerous books for children, magazine articles, and reviews. *Educ.*: Dorchester; King's College, London. Pupil of John Hicks, ecclesiastical architect, 1856-61; read Latin and Greek with a fellow-pupil, 1857-60; sketched and measured many old country churches now pulled down or altered; removed to London and worked at Gothic architecture under Sir A. Blomfield, A.R.A., 1862-67; prizeman of Royal Institute of British Architects, 1863; the Architectural Assoc., 1863; wrote verses, 1865-68; gave up verse for prose, 1868-70; but resumed it later. Holds Gold Medal of Royal Society of Literature; Member of the Council of Justice to Animals; is against blood-sport, dog-chaining, and the caging of birds. [A long list of his publications follows.] *Address*: Max Gate, Dorchester, Dorset. *Club*: Athenaeum.

To the basic biographical information provided by this entry, composed by Hardy for *Who's Who*, needs to be added the fact that he died on 11 January 1928, in his eighty-eighth year. But the entry offers something more than facts: as with so many of Hardy's writings, its unexpected emphases and unobtrusive evasions seem to betray, for the most part unconsciously, the peculiar cast of his mind and personality. The quiet hint of modest origins and an education largely self-conducted, almost drowned by the muster-roll of honorary degrees; the trivial half-deception of 'King's College, London' (he had attended

an evening class in French there for 'a term or two', apparently in 1865-6); the slightly absurd parading of his first wife's kinship with an archdeacon; the space devoted to his architectural career, the dryness of 'gave up verse for prose . . . but resumed it later', and the sudden passion of the reference to cruelty to animals – all these suggest that the long and productive journey from early-Victorian Dorset to the Athenaeum, two honorary fellowships, and the Order of Merit had not been pursued without the creation or exacerbation of certain tensions or compulsions. Which is perhaps no more than to say that, like any major artist, Hardy is a man difficult to understand and foolish to attempt to seize in a neat phrase or two, and that his work both provides an insight into his complex and remarkable individuality and itself demands some understanding of that individuality in order to be fully understood.

Hardy's work is strongly localized – firmly rooted in an intimately known region and, especially in the case of the fiction, a specific epoch in the history of English rural society. To have been born in a certain place at a certain moment in history was his first and indispensable qualification as a writer: indeed, born ten years later, or in the next county, or in a different social group, he might never have become a writer at all, and would certainly have been a very different one. In Hardy's verse and prose, however, time and place are repeatedly transcended, and the vast and the minute, the timeless and the transitory, continually juxtaposed. He was fascinated by the intrusion of the particular upon the universal, and by the quirkiness of the individual lot in relation to the endlessly repeated cycle of human existence; but he could also view the situation the other way round, and whereas most writers deal in years and generations, Hardy is fond of placing human destiny against a background of millennia. He found especially appealing the way in which even a single human existence is capable of spanning a whole epoch of history, and thus in a sense overcoming the normal temporal limitations of the lonely personality. He treasured his acquaintance with Mrs Anne Procter, the famous literary hostess, whose memories went back to the age of Wordsworth and Keats, and who survived to become the subject of a ribald rumour that Henry James had made her a proposal of marriage. And, when he was nearly eighty, he wrote in his diary: 'It bridges over the years to think that Gray might have seen Wordsworth in his cradle, and Wordsworth might have seen me in mine.' (Gray was born in 1716, more than 200 years before these words were written.) Hardy's own lifetime was remarkable for this 'bridging' quality, covering as it did an unprecedented

era of change in the public sphere, in scientific and technological development, and in intellectual and moral life, as well as embracing a career of some sixty years as a continuously active writer. Hardy was born when Victoria had been on the throne for only three years, and survived to welcome her great-grandson (as the Prince of Wales) into his home. He began his schooling in the year in which the *Communist Manifesto* was published, and he lived to see the Russian Revolution; he was already a young man when Darwin's *Origin of Species* appeared, and in his old age he took an interest in the theories of Einstein; he belonged to the generation which was overwhelmed by the poetry of Swinburne, he heard Dickens read, and met Tennyson and Browning; but he lived to ponder the poetic techniques of T. S. Eliot and D. H. Lawrence, and to discuss his work with Virginia Woolf. In studying Hardy and his writings, therefore, we study the two or three generations in which modern England, and modern literature, came into being.

It is scarcely thinkable that these revolutions in life, thought and feeling should not have left their mark on an author's work, especially one who served the art of fiction for a quarter of a century. But if Hardy's work is not fully intelligible without reference to external circumstances and processes, it also draws much of its characteristic strength from deeply felt private experiences and preoccupations. It is important, consequently, to see it in relation to his personal life as well as to its wider context. Such an aim, however, is more easily conceived than fulfilled: Hardy was an intensely, almost morbidly, reserved man who clung tenaciously to an inviolable privacy even when he was world-famous and persistently lionized. This is not to say that he was a recluse or a misanthrope, for one of the many paradoxes of his character is that his deep reticence did not prevent him from going into society and enjoying the friendship or acquaintance of many men and women, including some of the leading figures of his day. If half of him had a hermit's nature, the other half was a rather conventional late-Victorian gentleman, 'a good clubman' (as the *Dictionary of National Biography* was later to record), 'a gracious host' (as one of his friends, Frederic Harrison, attests), a practical man of affairs, managing his investments shrewdly, a respected member of the local bench, a governor of the grammar school and a writer of letters to the newspapers. But it remains true that to understand his inner nature, and the sources from which his best poetry and fiction originated, is peculiarly difficult. It is not, as in the case of some writers, that evidence of various kinds is lacking; it is, if anything, over-abundant and frequently

contradictory. And the difficulty is increased by the deviousness (not to put it more strongly) Hardy often displayed in his comments on his own life and work, most notably in that extraordinary monument, his autobiography. Outside his books, his long life was relatively uneventful: with only a few exceptions (and perhaps some others which still puzzle or elude his biographers), the real landmarks of his eighty-seven years are the shelf-full of volumes of prose and verse, and much of the outward drama of his existence relates to the vicissitudes of their composition, publication and reception. But his inner life, so much less easily known, was rich and intense; it involved an unusual sensibility which finds expression in almost every line he wrote, and has commended his novels, stories and poems to millions of readers all over the world; and for this reason, while the present chapter can concern itself mainly with the outward circumstances of Hardy's life as man and author, it is in the more detailed discussion of his work in later chapters that we may hope to come a little closer to the essential Thomas Hardy.

Early Years

Hardy was born on 2 June 1840, in the hamlet of Higher Bockhampton, a few miles from the town of Dorchester – within walking distance, that is, of a small but busy community which formed the commercial and social centre of an agricultural region, yet at the same time in a secluded corner set well back from the main road. The railway, which had already transformed both landscape and life-style in most other parts of England, had not yet come to Dorset, though it was to do so within a few years. Although the interior of the Hardy cottage has changed since his childhood, and although some neighbouring dwellings have disappeared, the setting is still peaceful, with woodland beginning a few paces from its door. Yet it would be wrong for the modern admirer imaginatively to recreate the environment of Hardy's childhood in wholly idyllic terms. The living conditions of the rural poor within a short distance of his birthplace are graphically brought home by the *Eight Letters to His Royal Highness Prince Albert* published in 1855 by the Rev. Henry Moule, Vicar of Fordington St George, just outside Dorchester, and father of a man who was to become an important influence on Hardy's personal and intellectual development. Moule's letters describe the cholera outbreak of 1854 and the local conditions which encouraged the spread of the disease. In his parish some 1,100 persons lived in a space covering five acres. The typical

cottage consisted of a single room, which might be as little as eight feet square, opening on to the street, with a similar room above it. Four feet away, on the opposite side of a lane, was another row of dwellings. Most lacked a privy: sewage was commonly disposed of in the mill pond, which also provided water for washing and sometimes even 'for culinary purposes'. Hardy's neat and comfortable home was at least as far removed from such dwellings as it was from the manor-houses of the local aristocracy; but, as he grew up, he must have been aware of the extremes of a society in which he occupied a place somewhere near the middle.

He was later to claim kinship (not always quite plausibly) with various Hardys notable in Dorset history over several centuries; certainly both his parents came from long-established Dorset families. His father had risen to be a builder and an employer of labour – a matter of some importance in the nice discrimination of social levels to which Hardy was always to be highly sensitive. Like his own father before him, Thomas Hardy senior was also a gifted amateur musician, his activities centring on (without being confined to) the parish church. Hardy later noted in the margin of one of his books that his father spoke dialect to his workmen, but that standard English was spoken in the home. Such a childhood acquainted the physically fragile and withdrawn boy with the sights and sounds of rural life and the beliefs and superstitions of country folk; it accustomed his ear to local speech, while at the same time implanting an awareness of different social levels. His first 'love affair', at the age of about ten, and in a strictly Shelleyan sense, was with a lady more than four times his age and considerably above his station: Mrs Julia Augusta Martin was the lady of the manor, and his affection for her seems to have been reciprocated. He was a very early reader: among his books were Dryden's *Virgil*, Johnson's *Rasselas*, and a popular illustrated history of the Napoleonic wars which was to give birth to a lifelong enthusiasm for the period. He also read Shakespeare, Scott and Bunyan, as well as such popular novelists as Dumas and G. P. R. James. The catalogue of his mild precocity also includes early talent as a violinist, and he was to remain deeply sensitive to music throughout his life. His family were orthodox church-going members of the Church of England, and (as he relates in the *Life*) a favourite game of the young Hardy was to wrap a tablecloth around himself and to preach a sermon in imitation of the local vicar; it was predicted that he would become a parson. Later Hardy, whom one of his critics was to refer to as 'the village atheist', taught for a time in the parish Sunday school. His deep familiarity with the language of

the Bible, as well as the liturgy and hymnody of the Anglican church, remained with him, and finds expression in hundreds of passages of prose and verse.

His formal education was limited to some eight years of schooling, first at the village school, then, from the age of nine, in Dorchester. He began Latin, as an 'extra', at twelve. At sixteen he entered into pupillage with Hicks of Dorchester, architect and church-restorer; and architecture was to be the major concern of his working life for the next sixteen years, his career as an architect (not without its own modest distinction) overlapping that as novelist. This training, combined with what must have been a naturally acute visual sense, is manifested at many levels in his writings. It was a period of energetic 'restoration' – often a euphemism for extensive rebuilding in accordance with modern tastes – of medieval churches; and Hardy's architectural career was to be responsible for the important early years in London and the 1870 visits to Cornwall, so fateful in his emotional life. At the same time that he was acquiring his training in Hicks's office, however, he pursued a self-ordained course of private study in non-architectural subjects, especially languages and literature. Before this time he had added to his schoolboy Latin a beginning in French and German; now he began the study of Greek, both the classical authors and the New Testament, reading hard for two or three hours before breakfast and the daily walk into Dorchester. Among the books he read at this period was the controversial *Essays and Reviews* (1860), which questioned the bases of religious orthodoxy. Sixty years later, Hardy recalled that he lived at this time 'a life twisted of three strands': his work as an architectural student, the daybreak studies which must have been undertaken as some measure of compensation for the lack of a university education, and his continuing participation in the rustic community, which included playing the fiddle at local weddings and other festivities.

One of his closest friends was Horace Moule, Cambridge graduate, sound Greek scholar, and son of the vicar of Fordington. Moule's role seems to have been that of mentor to the younger man; Robert Gittings has recently argued convincingly that his suicide in 1873 left an ineradicable impression on Hardy, whose 'emergence as a fully tragic artist' can be dated from that event. Hardy, who had the instincts and tastes of a scholar but who was under the necessity of earning his living and qualifying in the profession to which he was committed, evidently turned to Moule for intellectual guidance and personal encouragement. He was bitterly disappointed when the latter advised him to abandon Greek, as of doubtful value to architectural success; one suspects that

what he really longed for was a little urging to make his way to a university, whatever the price, though in later years he claimed that he might have gone to Cambridge had he wished. His escape from architecture, however, was to be by another route, and to take much longer. Moreover, he probably succeeded in acquiring a wider store of knowledge through his own efforts than would have been conferred by any university in that period. His intellectual self-help was to place at his disposal a reasonably sound acquaintance with classical and modern languages and literatures, history, theology, philosophy, science and art history. His writings constantly bear witness (at times, obtrusively so) to the range and, sometimes, the depth of his knowledge: *Two on a Tower*, for instance, demonstrates his keen interest in astronomy, most of his novels are scattered with references to the history of painting, and his preparations for *The Dynasts* involved extensive historical researches.

In 1862 he moved to London and found work in the office of a well-known architect, Arthur Blomfield. It was six months before he threw away the return half of the railway ticket he had bought for the journey from Dorchester; as it turned out, he was to spend more than five years in the metropolis. During 1863 we find Moule writing to him on the acquisition of a literary style and the use of prose models. Clearly Hardy has sought his advice and is already combining his architectural duties at this date with literary aspirations. He was not neglectful of these duties, however, and the omens for prosperity as an architect were favourable. In 1863 he was awarded the essay prize of the Royal Institute of British Architects. But he was also by this time beginning to use the pen as well as the pencil. After abandoning a short-lived notion of becoming an art critic for the press, he set his literary sights higher, and by the middle of the decade was writing poems and submitting them to magazines, with a signal lack of success. A few, however, survived to achieve publication more than thirty years later, and the earliest of the *Collected Poems* belong to 1865-6. Later he toyed with the idea of writing blank-verse dramas, and in his efforts to learn something of the theatre from the inside he even appeared briefly in a walking-on part in a Covent Garden pantomime. In the event his first published work, apart from a few trifles in a Dorchester newspaper, was a humorous sketch, 'How I Built Myself a House', which appeared in *Chambers's Journal* in 1865. In London he went to theatres and dances, operas and oratorios, attended French classes in the evening at King's College (later listed in *Who's Who* as one of his places of education), heard Dickens read at the Hanover Square Rooms, and

was present at Palmerston's funeral in Westminster Abbey, characteristically noting in a letter to his sister that the former Prime Minister was a link between their own age and that of Pitt and Burke. He also read at the British Museum, and at one period walked every day 'for many months' from Blomfield's office in Adelphi Terrace to the National Gallery, where he would spend twenty minutes after lunch on a self-conducted course on the history of painting, 'confining his attention to a single master on each visit'. He had moved away from Dorset in more than a merely physical sense, and his intellectual and emotional development had left the village church far behind, though he was never to forsake it entirely. His diary for these years shows that he was much impressed by Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, but found himself unable to accept the premises on which Newman's eloquent religious arguments were founded.

In the summer of 1867 ill health drove him back to Dorchester, and he resumed his earlier mode of existence, walking from his parents' cottage to Hicks's office. It seems to have been at this time that, after a further brief flirtation with poetry, he decided to abandon verse in favour of prose, as a more promising avenue to seeing his work in print, and wrote (in the latter half of 1867) his first novel: *The Poor Man and the Lady. By the Poor Man*. It is clear that his decision to turn to the novel sprang from necessity rather than choice: he felt no consuming interest in prose fiction, and his favourite reading was in the poets, not the novelists; but he must have realized that it offered the only possibility of making literature his profession. The careers of Dickens, George Eliot, Trollope (all still writing at this time) and others had proved that fortune as well as fame could be the reward of the successful novelist.

This first novel has disappeared. We have, however, a fair notion of its nature from a long letter written to Hardy by Alexander Macmillan, the publisher, to whom he had sent it in July 1868. We also have Hardy's own description of it, half a century later in his autobiography, as 'a sweeping dramatic satire of the squirearchy and nobility, London society, the vulgarity of the middle class, modern Christianity, church-restoration, and political and domestic morals in general . . . the tendency of the writing being socialistic, not to say revolutionary . . .'. It was evidently a sardonic treatment of the theme of class-distinction, and an exposure of the hollowness of 'good' society - working off, no doubt, diverse and keenly felt personal frustrations; and it was apparently loosely constructed, with an absence of 'plot' but some well-written scenes. (At least one of them, praised by Macmillan's reader,

John Morley, seems to have been salvaged for *Under the Greenwood Tree*.) Undaunted by Macmillan's rejection, Hardy sent his manuscript to another publisher, Chapman and Hall, where it was read by the novelist and poet George Meredith. Hardy set down (again, fifty years after the event) his recollections of an interview with Meredith: the gist of the latter's advice was that, while the book was publishable, it invited hostility from 'the conventional reviewers', and would do his future as an author no good. Meredith suggested that the young novelist should either drastically rewrite the book, or, better still, begin another novel with a more strongly constructed plot. Hardy opted for the second alternative, and took Meredith at something more than his word – the result being *Desperate Remedies*, his earliest surviving novel.

For the next few years, Hardy continued to follow his architectural career and to devote his leisure time to further efforts at fiction. This phase of part-time authorship coincided with his courtship of Emma Lavinia Gifford, whom he had met in Cornwall, while engaged on church-restoration business, in the spring of 1870. Their relationship over the next forty years was to be the source of much joy at first, of a longer period of pain and bitterness, and eventually, after her death, of some of his finest poems.

In the novels written during this period, one has a sense of Hardy groping for a type of fiction that was both congenial to his temperament and experience and likely to find acceptance in the literary market-place. *Desperate Remedies* is a conscientious exercise in the 'sensation novel', which in the previous decade had proved enormously successful and lucrative in the hands of such best-sellers as Wilkie Collins and M. E. Braddon. *Under the Greenwood Tree* represents a complete change of direction: it is a village love-story, written at Bockhampton in the early stages of Hardy's courtship, and it rejects the sensation novel as a model in favour of the school of realistic fiction popularized by George Eliot. In it, for the first time, Hardy exploited his deep knowledge of rustic life and speech, no doubt seen and heard the more clearly after his long absence. He may well have been prompted to this change of direction by the fact that two of the most influential critical organs of the day, the *Athenaeum* and the *Spectator*, had praised the presentation of rustic life in *Desperate Remedies*. *Under the Greenwood Tree* was written shortly after the appearance of these reviews. Already one notes a pattern emerging in Hardy's early ventures into fiction: he characteristically effects a compromise between the kind of novel he is, by nature and gifts, best qualified to write, and the kind that his study of the market suggests as likely to be