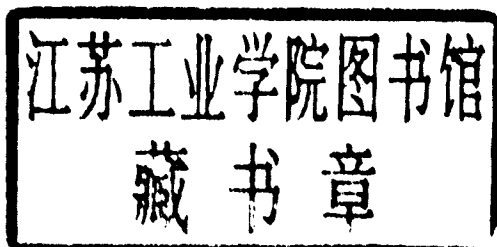


A COMPANION TO  
*THOMAS  
HARDY*

EDITED BY  
**KEITH WILSON**

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 **WILEY-BLACKWELL**

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# Abbreviations

The following short-form designations are used for frequently cited texts. In the case of Hardy's novels, citations in the text refer to the edition of the novel listed in a chapter's individual "Reference and Further Reading" list.

AL	<i>A Laodicean</i>
CL	<i>The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy</i> , ed. Richard Little Purdy and Michael Millgate, 7 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978–88)
CPV	<i>The Variorum Edition of the Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy</i> , ed. James Gibson (London: Macmillan, 1979)
CPW	<i>The Complete Poetical Works of Thomas Hardy</i> , ed. Samuel Hynes. 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982–95)
D	<i>The Dynasts</i>
DR	<i>Desperate Remedies</i>
FFMC	<i>Far From the Madding Crowd</i>
GND	<i>A Group of Noble Dames</i>
HE	<i>The Hand of Ethelberta</i>
JO	<i>Jude the Obscure</i>
LLI	<i>Life's Little Ironies</i>
LN	<i>The Literary Notebooks of Thomas Hardy</i> , ed. Lennart A. Björk, 2 vols. (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1985).
LW	<i>The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy</i> , ed. Michael Millgate (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984)
MC	<i>The Mayor of Casterbridge</i>
MV	<i>Moments of Vision</i>
PBE	<i>A Pair of Blue Eyes</i>
RN	<i>The Return of the Native</i>
TD	<i>Tess of the d'Urbervilles</i>
THPV	<i>Thomas Hardy's Public Voice: The Essays, Speeches, and Miscellaneous Prose</i> , ed. Michael Millgate (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001)
TM	<i>The Trumpet-Major</i>
TT	<i>Two on a Tower</i>
UGT	<i>Under the Greenwood Tree</i>
W	<i>The Woodlanders</i>
WB	<i>The Well-Beloved</i>
WT	<i>Wessex Tales</i>

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# Introduction

*Keith Wilson*

The life and work of Thomas Hardy – to appropriate the phrase that he adopted as the title for his disguised autobiography, published under the name of his second wife, Florence Emily Hardy – intersect in a complex of paradoxes that make him a key transitional figure, perhaps *the* key transitional figure, in nineteenth-century literature's movement towards modernism. The most obvious of these was born of the good fortune of longevity: the last surviving of the great Victorian novelists, in the last thirty years of his life he turned away from fiction towards poetry and lived long enough to become one of England's most important twentieth-century poets. In returning to the medium that he claimed had always been his first love, he began the process that would ultimately establish his secure status as that rarest of literary phenomena: a writer whose achievements are defined equally by work in both prose and verse. Critical acceptance of a parity of importance between his writings in the two very different genres took some time to emerge. While a scattering of critical work was published on the poetry in the forty years after his death, it was as late as 1972 before Donald Davie, in his book *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry*, advanced the then deliberately provocative claim, though it seems tame enough now, that "in British poetry of the last fifty years . . . the most far-reaching influence, for good and ill, has not been Yeats, still less Eliot or Pound or Lawrence, but *Hardy*." Once the assertion had been made, it seemed a judgment whose time had inevitably come. Within a year, Philip Larkin's *Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse* had found space to include more poems by Hardy than by any other single poet.

This familiar view of Hardy's bifurcated literary position, one foot lodged firmly in nineteenth-century fiction and the other planted just as securely in twentieth-century poetry, is a reading that many of the essays in this collection seek to qualify by bringing the fiction and the verse into more seamless relationship with each other. The essays gathered together here range confidently between the two, an ease of movement that testifies not only to the natural imaginative reciprocity between Hardy's work in prose and poetry, but also to the critical assurance that comes from the long immersion these scholars have all had in their subject: rarely if ever have quite so many distinguished

Hardyans been brought together between one set of book covers. While undermining the conventional genre-based way of viewing their subject, they also cumulatively foreground the complex array of paradoxes that Hardy's life and work suggest.

He was a writer whose sensibility and subject matter were shaped by intimate experience in formative years of south-west England's rural life, knowledge of whose rhythms and ways allowed him to create a whole imaginatively consistent world that restored to currency the evocative regional designation "Wessex." Along with Wordsworth, he is probably England's best-known "nature" writer, and even Wordsworth is not quite so inextricably associated with a particular area of rural England as Hardy, who by reimagining Wessex reinvented it. But he also relished his secure place in the socially and intellectually sophisticated world of contemporary London, translating his early reputation as a benign regional pastoralist into one as a dangerous, at times almost subversive, freethinker, so given to challenging social and religious orthodoxies as to become the kind of writer whose books a bishop might burn. A non-believer, confident only in the bleak faith that after a fifty-year search he would have discovered God had a God been there to discover, he remained throughout his life more responsive to the traditions, liturgy, tunes, buildings, and ingrained community rituals of the Anglican Church than is many a convinced Christian. An acute recorder of fleeting circumstantial minutiae – the fascinated muser on the mysteries embodied in the most ephemeral of earth's creatures – he also, perhaps more insistently than any other Victorian or modern writer, viewed the world and everything within it against the immensities of a daunting spatial and temporal infinitude. A consummate lyricist, and creator of one of the most poignantly personal elegiac sequences in the language, he believed his major poetic work to be an epic drama chronicling the public history of Napoleonic Europe across a whole decade, in this making a judgment with which many of his contemporaries agreed.

Even his supposed "pessimism," seized on by early commentators as manifesting an almost perverse desire to exact, in his own words, "a full look at the Worst," was conveyed in works that had, and still have, the capacity to generate in countless non-academic readers (and a good few academic ones) a surprisingly celebratory affirmation of the intensity of life's pleasures: love, community, music, dance, humor, and, perhaps above all, wonder in the face of nature's incandescent beauties and mysteries. Admittedly it sometimes seems like a predictable stock of Hardyan favorites that will be invoked in testimony to his capacity to capture and relish life's riches, enduring traditions, and whimsical humor: the Christmas dance at the tranter's from *Under the Greenwood Tree*; *Far From the Madding Crowd's* sheep-shearing in the "Great Barn," a secular cathedral celebratory of community rituals that "had suffered no mutilation at the hands of time"; that breathless paean to erotic anticipation, "Lalage's Coming"; "The Ruined Maid," the respectable world's risqué nod to the enlightened self-interest of sexual opportunism; and supremely, "Great Things," whose last-stanza acknowledgment of the inevitable passing of fleshly pleasures – drink, dance, love – cannot undermine the intensity of their antecedent celebration. But for all the predictability of these favorite exhibits for the defense, those earlier commentators who saw Hardyesque pes-

simism as a determinative charge that required answering no longer seem even to begin to do justice to the rich complexity of Hardy's responses to human circumstance.

For perhaps the most significant paradoxes that Hardy's work embodies are those relating to what are unanswerable, finally moral, questions about humanity's place in the world. On the one hand, he was a thinker who found life to offer so few and limited consolations as recurrently to figure consciousness as an ironic burden without which humanity might well have been far better off. From this perspective, the post-Darwinian human lot seems sufficiently harrowing as to make Michael Henchard's desire to be wiped from human memory, or Tess's lament to "have my life unbe," or Little Father Time's horrific solution to economic deprivation and social exclusion appear as rational as they are tragic. But on the other hand, there is an equally enduring sense in Hardy's work that the world's only hope of ultimate betterment resides entirely in that same questionable gift of consciousness.

Too often mere lip service has been paid to this aspect of Hardy's thinking by reflex identification of the somewhat cold comfort to be found in the closing lines of *The Dynasts*, which offer the hope, expressed by the Chorus of the Pities, that consciousness may come to inform the Will "till It fashion all things fair." The comfort feels all the colder for Hardy's subsequent apparent retraction of this possibility in the claim that, had he written *The Dynasts* after the First World War, its last words, which proved nothing anyway, would not have gone to Pities. The speculative inclination that lay behind those words has been reduced to mere tokenism in much critical commentary, perhaps because that routinely invoked pessimism has in literary critics long since hardened into the cynicism for which contemporaries mistook it in Hardy. In differing ways many of the essays in this collection address important aspects of the meliorative impulse in Hardy's thinking. Behind, for example, George Levine's notion that "Hardy looks with Darwinian eyes and re-enchants" the world and Angelique Richardson's conclusion that "for Hardy, to be a good human at the end of the nineteenth century was to be close to, and acknowledge kinship with, animals" lies recognition of that affirmativeness to which so many Hardy enthusiasts instinctively respond. While he may have been unable to assert with the confidence of Browning's Fra Lippo Lippi that "This world's no blot . . . / Nor blank; it means intensely, and means good," he does recognize a vital role for humanity in finding a "way to the Better" that gives genuine philosophical purchase to that most quintessentially Hardyan of human virtues: loving-kindness.

These new essays by thirty of the world's foremost Hardy scholars engage with many of the contradictory but densely interfused aspects of Hardy's genius. They provide the fullest exploration of the immense variety and intellectual range of Hardy's work to be found within a single volume. I am very grateful to all those contributors who have helped bring it to completion. In addition, I would like to record special thanks, for a variety of scholarly kindnesses, to Pamela Dalziel, April London, Michael Millgate, and Mary Rimmer, and at Blackwell to Emma Bennett, Al Bertrand, Ally Dunnnett, Hannah Morrell, and Janet Moth, whose copy-editing was exemplary.



