

# The Hardy Society Journal

## Spring 2008

### EDITOR'S NOTES

The Hardy Society saw out the old year in festive fashion and welcomed in the new with imagination and innovation. Various entertainments and events, including the 'Victorian Evening', are described in 'News and Events' and on the Letters pages. Indeed, the Dorchester Mayor and his wife so enjoyed the Victorian concert that they joined the Society! In January the New Hardy Players trod the boards in a timely reflection on Hardy's life. A glance at the 2008 Programme of Events should whet your appetite for the Conference festivities in July.

In this issue we continue our endeavour to reflect the truly international make-up of the Society, and the world-wide interest in Hardy and his work: Ilaria Mallozzi's 'Letter from Italy' is complemented by a review of a publication by one of our Italian members, Dr Salvatore Costantino: *Geografia e Paesaggio nel Romanzo Jude The Obscure di Thomas Hardy*.



Those interested in Hardyan geography and topography may find the following website, brought to my attention by Peter Rushforth, interesting and informative:  
[http://neal.oxborrow.net/Thomas\\_Hardy/Hardyplacenames.htm](http://neal.oxborrow.net/Thomas_Hardy/Hardyplacenames.htm) It has what is surely one of the most comprehensive lists of Hardy place names.

My thanks once again to those members who have supplied news and reports of local events and activities relating to Hardy. Please remember, the deadline for copy – and for competition entries – is printed at the back of the journal.



The cover illustration was kindly provided by Trevor Johnson, who found it loose in a book someone gave to Oxfam, where he works in the bookshop. The photographer's name is given and the facsimile signature authenticates it as having Hardy's approval, but of what book was it the frontispiece? Trevor surmises that 'it was an anthology (several volumes?) of 'contemporary' writing (from the late C19 or early C20 to judge from the portrait). Maybe Great Writers of Our Day or some such title, maybe including a short story by Hardy?' Perhaps this is a mystery for one of our readers to solve?



It is with regret that we report the deaths of two much loved and highly respected members of the Society, Dr Claudius Beatty and Edgar Reed. An obituary of Dr Beatty appears in this journal, and a full review of his revised edition of Hardy's 'Architectural

Notebook', published by the DCM in 2007, will appear in the Summer issue of the *HSJ*. Professor Michael Millgate will reflect on Dr Beatty's contribution to Hardy studies in the 2008 *THJ*.

Edgar Reed, and his wife Jean, had been involved with the Hardy Society since the early 1990s. With his love and knowledge of his native Dorset, his practical help during the conference weeks was invaluable. He regularly came to Birthday weekends and supported many other events, often helping with organisation.



*Edgar Reed © Peter Rushforth*

In 1994 Edgar and Jean became stewards at Max Gate and in 2007 were nominated as National Trust Stewards of the Year. The nomination was a fitting tribute, stating: 'they transformed people's visits to the house. Knowledgeable and sensitive they share anecdotes and serious information, both read to visitors and Ed's Dorset dialect gives authentic local colour to the vernacular in Hardy's poetry'.

Edgar's kindly presence and fund of local knowledge will be greatly missed and long remembered.



In 2008 we celebrate and enjoy Hardy's life and achievements, and his continuing popularity at home and abroad, in this the eightieth anniversary of his death. A glance at the back page of this journal reminds one that the Society 'began its life in 1968 when,

under the name “The Thomas Hardy Festival Society”, it was set up to organise the Festival marking the *fortieth* anniversary of Hardy’s death. So successful was that event that the Society continued its existence as an organisation dedicated to advancing “for the benefit of the public, education in the works of Thomas Hardy by promoting in every part of the World appreciation and study of these works”.’

As this anniversary has approached, the broadsheet press has raided its archives to resurrect articles from the past – some well-known, others less so – relating to Hardy’s life and works, and it is interesting to compare contemporary opinion with modern perspectives, to contrast the assessments of Hardy’s peers with more recent critical evaluations. In December 2007, the *Guardian* reprinted W.H. Auden’s ‘back-handed compliment’ to Hardy, published sixty years ago in *The Dyer’s Hand*: ‘My first Master was Thomas Hardy, and I think I was very lucky in my choice. He was a good poet, perhaps a great one, but not too good. Much as I loved him, even I could see that his diction was often clumsy and forced and that a lot of his poems were plain bad. This gave me hope where a flawless poet might have made me despair. [...] In imitating him, I was being led towards and not away from myself, but they were not so close as to obliterate my identity. If I looked through his spectacles, at least I was conscious of a certain eyestrain.’

On 27 December, a review from 1878 of *The Return of the Native*, ‘Mr Hardy and his pagan divinity’, was re-printed in the *Guardian*. This early reviewer found much to praise: ‘To show that Mr Hardy’s latest novel is interesting and exciting it is almost sufficient to say that in it he has returned to the bleak south country scenery and the primitive peasant life in portraying which he has already shown his greatest power’. However, the metropolitan critic cast doubt on the ‘realism’, and the ‘morality’ of Hardy’s characters:

The country folk talk as only Hardy’s country people do talk, that is with a curious mixture of extravagant conceit and preternatural simplicity ...

That [the main hero] fails to produce an impression of reality is a defect he shares with Mr Hardy’s best-conceived characters. Mr Hardy has so much skill in portraying the exceptional qualities that he seems almost to ignore the substratum of ordinary humanity without which our sympathy cannot be excited.

It is in his heroine, that Mr Hardy’s contempt for the received notions of character reaches its climax ... Mr Hardy does not say a word in approbation of Eustacia’s habit of mind; but he writes of her person and ways with a luscious fondness which, applied to such a woman, is to our mind more repulsive than a grosser sensuousness might often be.

[...]

Mr Hardy is so clever that we could sometimes suspect him of holding the same estimate as we do of his creation. But our readers shall judge. After the death thus met, 'The expression of her face' we are told 'was pleasant, as if a sense of dignity had just compelled her to leave off speaking.'

It seems almost equally difficult to conceive of anyone taking the trouble of writing such an elaborate jest, or to believe in a writer of Mr Hardy's acuteness supposing that anyone will share in the worship of his Pagan divinity.



Hardy's death, and burial, continue to arouse interest and debate. (See for example, 'Chairman's Notes', the account of a surprise appearance of a 'programme' from the Westminster Abbey Memorial service in 'Notes and Queries', and the report of the New Hardy Players' performance of 'A Life in Three Strands' in 'News and Events'.) I, perhaps indulgently, end my Notes with the words of the obituary published in the *Guardian*, 12 January 1928, and reprinted this year:

The death of Mr Thomas Hardy deprives the art of letters in England of its unquestionable head. He towered over other writers of fiction like a column, and there was something columnar in the massive grace of his work, in the solid and slowly laid basis of observation and thinking.

For he was one of the least freakish of writers, one of the least dependent upon any separable ornaments of wit, eloquence, and melody. He would keep a whole book low, as painters say, in tone, denying himself the use of the easier lures that an expert writer has at his command. All the time he would be creating in your mind, as by some minute process of molecular change, a state of feeling upon which the climax would impinge with a tremendous and unexpected momentum.

A book like "Tess of the D'Urbervilles" or "Jude the Obscure" invades your spirit like a wonderfully organised and handled army: each separate movement of an advancing column may seem trivial and isolated in itself, but there comes a time when you realise that every avenue of feeling in you has been occupied, and the forces which seemed scattered and slender are combined as if by magic to overwhelm you. To no tragic novelist do we surrender more completely at the last.

Hardy came to feel that the world was infested with irresponsible bafflings of the brave wit and the warm heart, with now a

fantastic series of crushing blows at the least defended, and now a grim visiting of some trivial fault or mistake with consequence of an extravagant ferocity.

He was one of the most compassionate of all writers; his description of the wounded pheasants bleeding to death after a day's shooting is ineffaceable from the memory; his sympathy seemed even to reach to the lives of the cattle, long dead, whose shoulders had polished the wood of the byre; and, behind the matter-of-fact description of Tess at her field work, after her calamity, you feel a kind of agony of helpless tenderness in the writer for all souls so troubled.

Hardy has given [English readers] their rights in rural Dorsetshire for ever – the massive modelling of its heath, the floodtide and ebb of sap in its woodlands and orchards. On the life of all these he looked with the vehemently delighting eye and heart of a mighty artist.

He who hopes, loves and looks forward will read all that Hardy has written and come away the richer at heart for drinking at a fountain of pity so deep, and the stronger in mind for contact with the glorious energies of so puissant an imagination.

CLAIRE SEYMOUR