

Drummer Hodge (first entitled The Dead Drummer, then changed to Drummer Hodge)

I

They throw in Drummer Hodge, to rest
Uncoffined – just as found:
His landmark is a kopje-crest kopje-crest – hill-crest (Afrikaans word)
That breaks the veldt around; veldt - grasslands
And foreign constellations west west – move west
Each night above his mound. mound – the little heap of earth over the spot where he is buried

II

Young Hodge the Drummer never knew –
Fresh from his Wessex home – Wessex – the south-west counties in England, especially Dorset
The meaning of the broad Karoo, karoo – barren plateau
The Bush, the dusty loam, the Bush – wild uncultivated country; loam - earth
And why uprose to nightly view
Strange stars amid the gloam. gloam - twilight

III

Yet portion of that unknown plain
Will Hodge for ever be;
His homely Northern breast and brain
Grow to some Southern tree,
And strange-eyed constellations reign
His stars eternally.

Hardy describes the fate of an anonymous and very young man, Drummer Hodge, who has gone out to fight against the Boers in South Africa and has died in some skirmish or battle. His body is found by his comrades and hastily buried. Hardy reflects on the circumstances in which this man, hardly more than a boy, found himself in an utterly strange country, for reasons he did not understand. Eventually his body becomes a part of that country, so very far from his native Wessex.

The first stanza opens with the violent, unceremonious action, the effort and haste stressed by the alliterative 'th': 'they throw in Drummer Hodge'. Drummer Hodge is buried immediately after some battle in the veldt, just chucked in, with no time for any ceremony. Hardy's selection of words underlines this hurry – 'throw in' 'uncoffined' (Hardy's own word, perhaps reminding us that there's no time or materials for even a coffin), 'just as found.' The f+n+d of 'uncoffined' is repeated in 'found', underlining the picture of this rushed tossing of bodies into a roughly dug trench. Interestingly, Hardy doesn't write that Drummer Hodge's body is thrown in, he writes 'Drummer Hodge', reminding us that this is happening to a person, not just a body. This, then, is the brutality and lack of respect of war; it is what happens to boys and men who are sent off to fight for their country – it's what all war is like. At any rate, Hardy conveys, in an understated, restrained, spare fashion the pathos of this hurried, scrappy burial, just shovelling the boy into the ground. 'Just as found' is harrowing: no-one even sees him die; no-one is with him in his last moments. His body is simply 'found.' If you move on to stanza 2, Hardy again focuses on the

person: Drummer Hodge was only 'young', 'fresh,' with no idea why he's out there, 'never knew', which adds to the pathos, I think.

After the brutal opening scene with its hasty burial of the dead Drummer Hodge, the tone becomes more reflective in stanza 2, concentrating on the puzzlement of the young boy about the meaning of why he was there at all. The third stanza puts the whole episode in a bigger context, contemplating the endless capacity of Nature to renew herself. Also, there is a feeling of the extraordinary vitality and creativity of Nature – from Drummer Hodge's body, she makes a tree. Unlike man, who wastes fellow-men (this condemnation of government action is to be found in 'At the War Office, London'), Nature wastes nothing.

In Stanza 1, unfamiliar Afrikaans words convey the strangeness of the place where English men have been sent out to fight: 'veldt', 'kopje-crest'. Other words underline the foreignness: 'foreign' 'west' (Tim Armstrong suggests that 'west' means move west). The strangeness of South Africa to a Dorset boy continues in stanza two with 'Karoo', 'Bush', 'strange', and in stanza three with 'strange-eyed constellations'. The stars in the skies over South Africa would indeed be completely different from the stars in the Northern Hemisphere that Drummer Hodge had grown up with and probably used to work out what time it was and what direction he was facing.

The three stanzas are quite distinct in content and time. Stanza one is concerned with what is done to Drummer Hodge's body. Stanza two focuses on his mind, his confusion, 'never knew...the meaning' 'and why'. In stanza three the two are fused, body 'his homely Northern breast', and his mind 'and brain'. The first verse is in the present tense, immediate and brutal: 'They throw in ...' The second verse is in the past tense, looking back at Drummer Hodge's brief life and lack of understanding of the circumstances that sent him to South Africa. The third verse is in the future tense, taking the long view 'reign his stars eternally.' The first, third, fifth lines in this verse run on to the second, fourth, sixth lines, giving a long, spacious feeling to the verse. This effect is intensified by the slowness of 'strange-eyed constellations.'

This poem is set in South Africa during the Second Boer War (October 1899 – May 1902). Hardy heard that a local Dorset drummer boy had died in the war, and was moved to write this poem. He wrote to a friend: '...in the country one knows everybody, or about everybody, for miles round, rich & poor, & many husbands & sons have disappeared from our precincts, & are continually talked about by their relatives, naturally enough. I wrote a little poem about the ghost of one who was killed the other day: also a few lines on the same subject in the *Westmr (Westminster) Gazette* of last Saturday.' (*Dec 26, 1899: vII, 242*). Michael Millgate, the biographer of Hardy, suggests that the "one who was killed" inspired 'The Dead Drummer' (*Literature*, 25 Nov 99), and "a few lines on the same subject" refers to 'A Christmas Ghost-Story', (*Westminster Gazette*, 23 Dec 1899).

The poem was first printed in November 1899, six weeks after the beginning of the Second Boer War. Hardy wrote several poems on the Boer War which can be read as a sequence, starting with the soldiers embarking and ending with 'The Souls of the Slain.' Many of his earlier poems were prompted by events in his private life: 'Neutral Tones', 'Thoughts of Phena', 'I look into my glass'. Now he was moved to

write about public events. In a letter to a friend, he wrote, 'I constantly deplore the fact that 'civilized' nations have not learnt some more excellent ... ways of settling disputes than the old and barbarous one, after all these centuries.' To another friend he wrote, 'The romance of contemporary wars has withered for ever: we see too far into them – too many details. Down to Waterloo war was romantic, was believed in ...'

Drummers were the youngest men, still almost boys and too young to fight. Hodge is a derogatory term, a nick-name, for a country bumpkin or an agricultural labourer. Hardy very much disapproved of this denigratory word as can be seen in a strongly-worded article called 'The Dorsetshire Labourer' written in 1883. You can read it on: http://www.thedorsetpage.com/genealogy/info/the_dorsetshire_labourer.htm So we don't even know the boy's name – he's anonymous, cannon-fodder; collateral damage, as we would say now. This reflects the miserable fact that he, like so many others, was unknown to those in charge of the war and unimportant to them. It also makes him representative of the many men who died in the war; in fact, there were even more British casualties than Boer.

The website: <http://www.boer-war.com> contains comprehensive information about every aspect of the Second Boer War (and the First). You may find the picture gallery particularly interesting. Page 3 has a photo entitled: Drummer outside tent. On page 4 is a heart-rending photo called 'Relaxing after Colesberg 1900' of a very young drummer boy (with drum) writing home.



[Relaxing after Colesberg 1900](#)

If you look at the way the three stanzas are put together, you find in each stanza that the first two lines are about Drummer Hodge; the next two are about the topography – an alien landscape whose foreignness is made clear by the unfamiliar Afrikaans words used for the landmarks; and the last two lines are, in each case, about the stars. It might be to do with man's insignificance in relation to the universe, the constellations and Africa, the huge foreign continent he finds himself in, which is indifferent to what happens to him. The indifference of the universe to man is a common theme in Hardy – see Chapter 16 of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) where he writes:

‘Not quite sure of her direction, Tess stood still upon the hemmed expanse of verdant flatness, like a fly on a billiard-table of indefinite length, and of no more consequence to the surroundings than that fly.’

There’s also the thought maybe that what happens to man is so random, whereas the topography and the constellations are structured and patterned in Hardy’s stanzas, two lines for each. Perhaps the rhyming words, too, mirror the pattern in each stanza of Drummer Hodge, landmarks, constellations/cosmos – so they reinforce the structure and pattern that are so conspicuously absent from Drummer Hodge’s life. In the first verse the rhyming words are: ‘rest’ (Drummer Hodge’s body); ‘kopje-crest’ (landmark); ‘west’ (constellations moving across the sky). In the second verse the rhyming words are ‘never knew’ (referring to Drummer Hodge); ‘Karoo’ (landmark); ‘nightly view (the stars). Still in the second verse: ‘His Wessex (Dorset) home’ (Drummer Hodge); ‘the dusty loam’ (South African earth); ‘gloom’ –twilight sky. The last stanza mixes Drummer Hodge and the strange South African landscape he’s buried in and the stars in the sky above him, to show that this strange, unexpected mixture is now for ever. ‘Portion’ (Drummer Hodge) ‘that unknown plain’ (strange, South African landscape); ‘Will Hodge’ (Drummer Hodge) ‘for ever be’ (South, ‘Grow to some Southern tree’ (landscape). It ends with the strange-eyed stars which will now look down on Hodge’s body, or the tree to which it has been transformed, ‘eternally’. The iambic rhythm stresses the rhyming words, too, highlighting their importance.

What is the poem concerned with? Hardy writes, as so often, about people, the landscape, and fate. Perhaps here he is showing the littleness of man in the face of the universe? The helplessness and exploitation of nameless individuals in the face of what governments decide?

An interesting and detailed exploration of the poem is to be found on:
<http://www.ablemuse.com/v9/essay/cristina-ceron>