

Thomas Hardy

A biographical sketch

The Novel Club

Andy Fabens for June 2, 2020

My first brush with Thomas Hardy occurred in the summer of 1959. I spent that summer as an AFS exchange student in Sweden, age 17. It was the summer between my Junior and Senior years at University School. *Jude the Obscure* was prescribed summer reading.

For me, it was a glorious summer. I lived with a Swedish family at their summer home on the west coast of Sweden. The term “exchange student” was a misnomer, there was no studying. Swedish young people then were expected to attain fluency in English, as well as French and German, by the time they were ready for university. My job, so to speak, was to pal around with the middle son Henrik, my age, and speak English with him. It also entailed having fun with a big group of other kids our age in the vicinity. There was boating and swimming on expeditions to some of the off shore islands. We often went hiking or sightseeing, and had wonderful parties most evenings at one house or another. Long, warm Midsummer evenings.

So, picture me dutifully lugging *Jude the Obscure* into that idyllic scene. I can’t think of a more grindingly pessimistic, sad, sad story of thwarted ambition, loss and devastation. I still wonder why the powers that be thought this was a suitable read for a 17-year-old at the threshold of life – perhaps for its cautionary tale of premarital sex. I did, however, plug along and read the thing. Henrik was always faintly amused to find me at it. Their tradition is to work incredibly hard during term time, and then relax and play just as diligently when on vacation.

I never forgave Hardy for intruding on me so, and it gave me some satisfaction, in studying up for this paper, to learn of the adverse critical reception of *Jude the Obscure* in 1895 and public outrage over its pessimism and depiction of immorality. Hardy in fact gave up novel writing at that point in his career.

And so, to his career: it was long and not easy, but really an impressive, self-driven march from a beginning with few advantages to an ending at the pinnacle of achievement in English literature. He was born in 1840 in obscurity in Upper Bockhampton a village a few miles outside Dorchester in Dorset. At his death in 1928 he was buried in Poets Corner of Westminster Abbey.

It is useful to understand Hardy’s family background and picture his early years in Dorset. Matters of class and socio-economic considerations figure strongly in his writing. He grew up keenly aware of his family’s circumstances in that regard. Both his father and mother were from large families localized for generations to Dorset and Devon. Hardy believed that his family had come down in the world from a more elevated status in earlier generations and speculated they were related to some of the more exalted families of that name in the region – once styled Hardye or Le Hardy, suggesting Norman origin.

Note in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, her family's decline is signaled by the shift of the family name to plain-old English Durbeyfield.

Whatever the past, it was clear at Hardy's birth that his immediate family was just above the line between the lowest wage-earning agricultural laborers and the next rung up, which included tradesmen and artisans who could contract for their work and hire others to work for them. His father was a stone mason who normally employed a few people, working as a builder. Hardy's biographer Michael Millgate (*Thomas Hardy – A Biography Revisited*, Oxford University Press, 2004) points out that the region of Dorset had been, and in Hardy's time still was, considered a very poor and backward part of the country where it could be very hard to make a living and that this particular class distinction was not simply a matter of snobbery, but, rather, potentially a matter of life and death. Note Henchard's rise and fall: from thatcher up to entrepreneur and back down to hired worker.

Hardy's father, also Thomas, was marginally successful at making money. He was easy-going and somewhat dilatory. As a result, the family got by, but was not prosperous. His mother Jemima was a fierce striver. There were four children: Thomas and his sister Mary and then, after an interval of some 10 years, another son and daughter. Jemima did the best she could for her children's education, lest they slip back to the laboring class or worse. They were a tight-knit family. The siblings were all remarkably close, considering some of the great differences in age, and looked after one another all their lives. Hardy had great affection for his father and admired his sweet disposition. They lived in the thatched-roof cottage widely pictured as "Hardy's Cottage".

Hardy was a frail child. As a result, he spent a lot of time at home inconspicuously taking in adult conversation amongst his parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and their assorted spouses and friends. Thus, he learned a lot more than the average child about family foibles, the ups and downs of adult life, regional history, doings in nearby Dorchester, and the like. He would later mine all this, and in fact all of his lifetime learning and observation, as material for his novels. His formal education was limited. At age 10 in 1850, he started walking the 3 miles into Dorchester to attend classes at a school run by a solo teacher. His mother drove a hard bargain over tuition. He was a good student, the classes were constructive, and he gradually grew in physical strength. Because of his late start he was actually older than his peers, but was continually taken for someone much younger because of his slight stature.

The Dorchester of this era was still very like its re-creation in the Casterbridge of *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. Hardy was a keen observer. This was a bustling county town, a hub of commerce, government and law. The visit of Prince Albert in 1849 was still a vivid memory. The same visit occurs in *Mayor* and so I think Hardy's imagined time line for the story in *Mayor* is roughly 1825-50. This schooling in Dorchester continued until 1857 when, at age 17, he was articled to a Dorchester architect named John Hicks.

During this time, he became friendly with the family of the Rev. Henry Moule, vicar in a nearby town, an inventor and a writer of note on variety of topics theological and otherwise. There were 7 Moule sons, most of whom went on to distinguished academic or ecclesiastical careers. This association inspired Hardy to dream of being able to attend university and possibly enter the church. His wide reading included particularly the Bible and classical literature. It seems, however, that Hardy always knew implicitly that a university education was both financially and socially out of his reach.

John Hicks was a good master and the office had a genial atmosphere. The architectural work involved mainly ecclesiastical buildings, Hicks' specialty. Hardy was happy in the situation. The work was not onerous and he had plenty of time for reading.

Millgate speculates that Hardy's interest in writing was first launched by his study of the Bible and his association with the church. Hardy grew to become an avowed agnostic, but his early attraction to religion was an important stepping stone for him. He actually remained a fairly regular churchgoer all his life and retained an encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible.

Hardy's reading gradually took a very intentional turn and he began notebooks of his personal observations on effective writing that he encountered in his reading, picking apart turns of phrase and word usages that he found particularly effective, or simply recording and learning new vocabulary. Those notebooks were in effect a self-made textbook on the art of writing.

Hardy finished out the three years of his articles and stayed an extra year with Hicks. Then in 1861, at age 21, he went off to London, without much fanfare or planning. By then the railway had reached Dorchester, so it was a simple matter. He had incredibly good luck in immediately landing a decent paying job with an architect, a notch up on the employment scale from his work with Hicks. He was also able to find good affordable lodgings and within a matter of several days was ensconced in London.

His career as a writer was embryonic in 1861, but the next dozen or so years showed a deliberate progression on Hardy's part, as he moved from intermittent writing, including poetry, to selling a short story to a magazine, to writing a novel which was rejected but treated with respect, to publishing a novel anonymously, which proved unsuccessful, to the publication of *Under the Greenwood Tree*, in 1872, his first acknowledged success. He left architectural work only when his income from writing became well assured with the success of *Far from the Madding Crowd* in 1874.

Our book for tonight *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) falls in the middle of a distinguished line of novels that stretched on to *Jude the Obscure* in 1895. Many of these were set in Hardy's "Wessex", his revival of the ancient name of a region that included the area of Dorset and Devon that Hardy knew and revered. After his initial years in London, he returned and really never left Wessex. He lived in a series of rented houses, eventually building a house of his own Max Gate on the outskirts of Dorchester, where he lived for the rest of his life. He gave the towns and villages of his Wessex pseudonyms that were used consistently in those novels. He used the real names for the physical features of the landscape. These Wessex novels Hardy classified as "Novels of Character and Environment." He also wrote what he called "Romances and Fantasies" and "Novels of Ingenuity." In his later years, Hardy would be honored by dramatizations at various levels of professionalism of characters and scenes from his novels. For me, the Wessex novels constitute the core of his work and the basis for his great popularity in his time.

He turned almost exclusively to writing poetry after 1895. He had another 30 some years to go. He also spent a lot of his time in managing the ongoing publication of his body of novels and his income from them -- work that the successful novelist of today would leave to agents and accountants.

Upon his first arrival in London, Hardy had a marked regional accent and countrified ways. He gradually grew in sophistication and stature as an active member of the London literary world. He retained, however, a simple friendly manner even at the height of his fame. Although based in Dorchester, he developed a regular pattern of seasonal residence in London for "the season" -- April-June -- which he

only gradually abandoned in old age. It was always an easy trip by rail to and from London. For years he welcomed a steady stream of visitors for tea at Max Gate. In 1923 the Prince of Wales paid him a call. Siegfried Sassoon was apparently on hand and widely spread the report of the Prince's most notable utterance: "My mother tells me you have written a book called *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. I must try to read it sometime."

There is not much in what I have sketched so far to account for the pessimism with which Hardy is often charged (and which so turned me off at age 17.)

So, what about the pessimism? First, I do believe that he should be credited with simple compassion for the less fortunate, and the rural poor had plenty of troubles. On another level: one commentator suggests that Hardy may simply be displaying "peasant fatalism." Also, there are a few times in his life in which Hardy evidently had bouts with mild depression.

The one part of Hardy's life in which, it seems, he did not enjoy great success was in love and marriage. He was a small man and usually described as slight and pale, perhaps not the sort of physical specimen that turned women's heads. At a young age, he thought himself in love with a young cousin, but this went nowhere. Later on, when marriage could have been a viable prospect for him, he developed a "understanding" with Eliza Nicholls, a fine, suitable young woman whose outstanding characteristic was an extreme piety. This relationship continued for some time, but foundered when it became apparent that Hardy actually favored her prettier and less pious sister. He courted the sister a bit, but she rather suddenly married another man. This unfortunate episode is said to have been immortalized in his choice of Elizabeth Jane as the name for Henchard's would-be daughter in *Mayor*. Eliza's sister was named Jane. "Elizabeth Jane" combines these names in a character who is said to have combined the best qualities of each of these lost loves. Sporadically throughout his life Hardy could become suddenly infatuated with a woman he would casually notice. Such an unfulfilled impulse could create in him a real and lasting sense of loss and longing that he expressed from time to time in his poetry and in situations he portrays in fiction.

When Hardy did marry, it was not in the full flush of romance. In 1870, he had met Emma Gifford in the hamlet of St. Juliot in Cornwall. She was the sister of the second wife of the elderly Rector of a dilapidated church where Hardy arrived on assignment as an architect's assistant, for the renovation of the church. The sister and her husband feared that Emma was on the verge of permanent spinsterhood. Her age was adroitly concealed from Hardy and her candidacy for marriage subtly promoted. Hardy did not find out that she actually was six months older than he until he was effectively hooked. Hardy was initially captivated by her. She wore her then vibrant corn-colored hair in long ringlets on either side of her face. The early 1870's were busy, stressful years for Hardy. With some initial success in writing, as already noted, he continually had several balls in the air with different publishers, and he was also working at architecture full time. Hardy and Emma finally married in 1874 after the gratifying success of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, when Hardy could finally call himself an author. They were both in their mid-thirties. The ringlets had begun to fade. It would prove to be a childless marriage and lasted until her death in 1912.

Emma, largely because of class differences, was always at odds with Hardy's family, particularly his redoubtable mother Jemima. Emma's family was a couple of rungs above Hardy's on the social ladder: her father had been a solicitor and other male relatives held high ecclesiastical office. Jemima always felt that Emma held herself above the Hardys, and in fact Emma did. The fact that Emma and the Hardys

all continued to live in the vicinity of Dorchester meant that this friction never abated. Emma herself had literary ambitions and pretensions, but was a tiresome conversationalist. She was little help to Hardy socially as he made his ascent in the literary world. He left her behind whenever possible. Observers would invariably comment on her poor appearance and a silliness of manner. At a social gathering in the 1890's an American woman novelist observed Emma as "an excessively plain, dowdy, high stomached woman with her hair drawn back in a tight little knot, and a severe cast of countenance." The novelist's companion remarked: "Mrs. Hardy. Now you may understand the pessimistic nature of the poor devil's work."

Hardy had other attachments to women over his life -- several close long-term associations based on common literary interests, but with some emotional content -- at least Hardy's part. One such relationship was with Florence Dugdale, who had some minor literary distinctions of her own and for a time lived in the Hardy household as an assistant to both Hardy and Emma. She came to understand and sympathize with both Hardy and Emma in their differences and disappointments with each other. She and Hardy would eventually marry after Emma's death. Interesting that he should marry again soon after Emma's death: *Jude the Obscure* was widely seen as an attack on the institution of marriage and in his book *The Well-Beloved*, issued in parts in 1892 and revised and reissued in 1897, the same sort of attack was made even more explicit. These writings seem overtly aimed at his marriage with Emma. Right after Emma's death, however, on the eve of his marriage to Florence, Hardy wrote and published a group of poems in recollection and stirring tribute to Emma. Those poems did not provide the best start to his second marriage, which proved to be only marginally better than the first. Despite the problems, both of Hardy's wives were of notable help to him in a more or less secretarial capacity.

Emma, in all bitterness, produced a telling and probably apt comment on Hardy's vicissitudes with women. In a letter to a woman friend, Emma wrote, of Hardy, "He understands only the women he invents, the others not at all"

As I think about Hardy and his work, the term "Victorian" keeps coming to mind. We think of Hardy's staying with Emma in a bad marriage and think "Victorian sense of duty." The usage abounds: Victorian prudery, Victorian sensibilities, Victorian standards, etc. Victorianism, though probably always a bit of a cliché, was a very real force in Hardy's time. It describes the urbanizing middle class that was perhaps the core of his readership. For them the novelty of Hardy's rural settings and the struggles of his characters of yesteryear held great interest in their contrast with the new industrialization and upward mobility of late 19th century Britain and the United States. In a sense, he wrote in opposition to it and yet he was very much a part of it.

An interesting aspect of Hardy's novel writing was the practice of serialization. Prior to my reading in the Millgate biography, I did not know that, economically speaking, the real money for most writers of Hardy's era came from payments for the serialized segments. Hardy was a rarity in being able to monetize his body of work for years after initial publication. The great magazines that published these installments each had their own concept of what their readership wanted and tolerated. Even a writer of Hardy's stature had to put up with bowdlerization of his texts or other changes to meet the prudish or sometimes just whimsical tastes imposed by the magazines. The changes demanded in Britain could be different from those in America. At the end, the publication of the novel as a whole was often an afterthought and generally not the money-making end of the enterprise. The novels that we now read come from the recombined serial segments with varying degrees of re-editing by the author. For

instance, the magazine parts for *Mayor* were scrubbed to try to cover up that Lucetta had previously been Henchard's mistress; and the episode of the starved goldfinch was included in the America edition, but omitted in the British. Thus, these novels are not purely the work of the author as all powerful artiste, but have been molded by the process of their production and the Victorian sensibilities of the time.

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