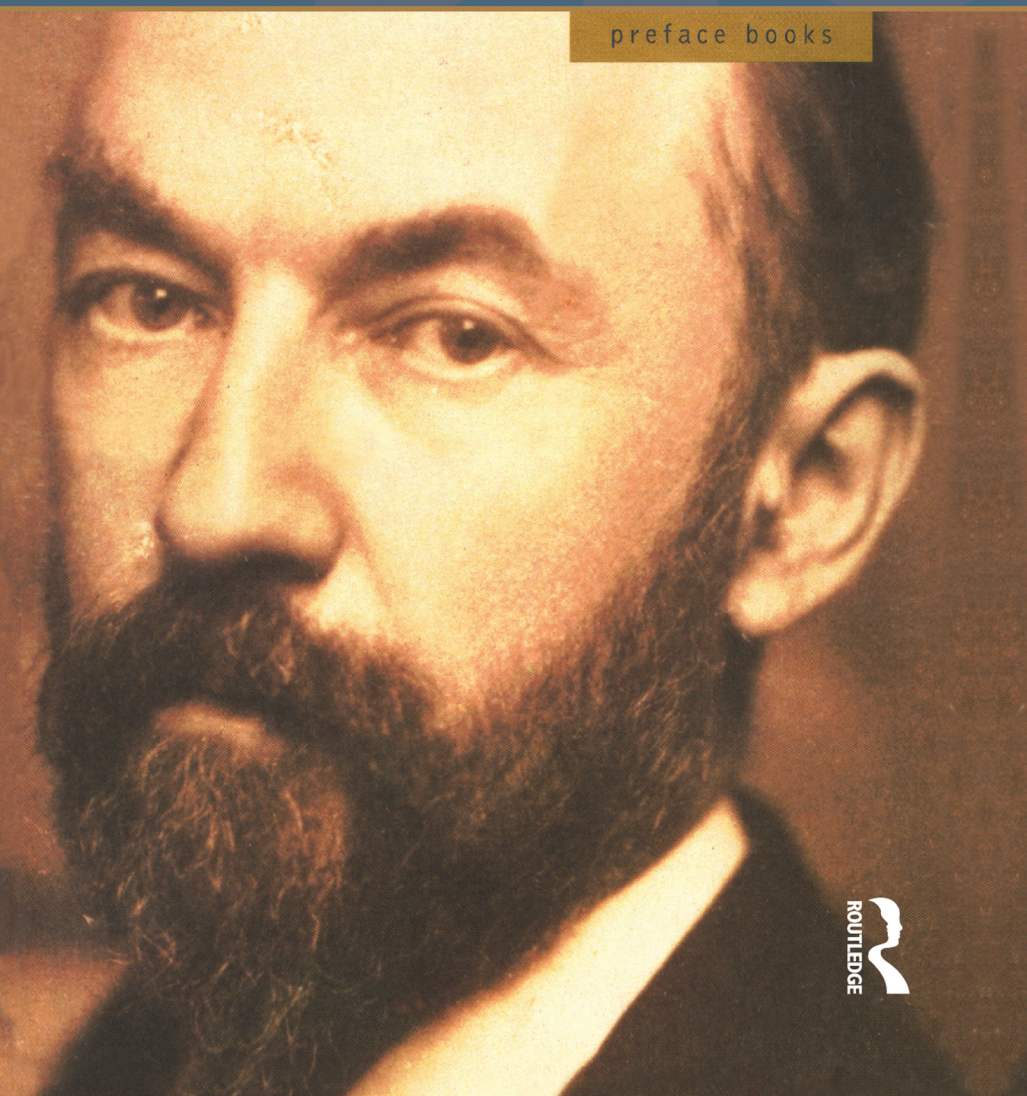
SECOND EDITION

MERRYN WILLIAMS

HARDY

preface books



ROUTLEDGE

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General Editor: JOHN PURKIS

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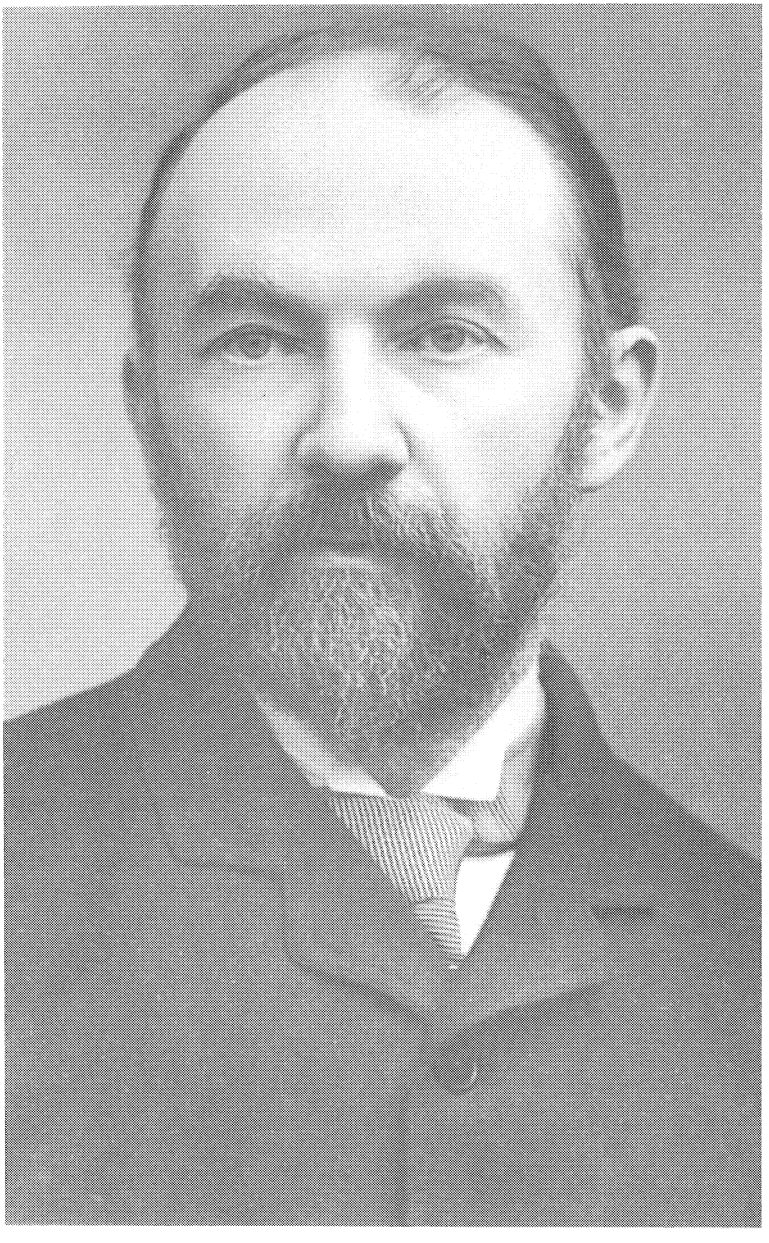

Thomas Hardy, 1891

A PREFACE TO

HARDY

MERRYN WILLIAMS

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Foreword to the first edition

A century on from their original reception the Wessex Novels of Thomas Hardy have entered into the national store of fictional masterpieces and are still eagerly read. Possibly Dickens alone of the great Victorian writers can equal or surpass Hardy's continuing success, a thought that would have pleased him most deeply. For many of us, though made aware of the unhappy social conditions of life in Hardy's Dorset, persist in finding colour, humanity and nostalgia present to a degree in the novels that almost excludes the darker emotions. There is still to this day a recognizable Hardy country and it stands fairly free from that more modern rural tragedy that goes by the name of development.

In this most readable, and unexpectedly positive study of Hardy's prose and verse, Merryn Williams offers a variety of scholarly approaches to her subject to demonstrate the depths of his power to release tragic emotion and universal humanity within the closely studied visual realism. In Part One she provides a firm historical perspective, reminding us that Hardy, for all his apparent isolation, could not escape the pervasive influence of the scientists and agnostics of Victorian England. We are invited to consider especially Charles Darwin, Thomas Huxley, John Stuart Mill and Matthew Arnold. The last-named writer's key poem, 'Dover Beach', quoted on p. 69, seems now to be part of a range stretching all the way to Beeny Cliff in Cornwall (see p. 160), that Cliff without a Name, the setting of one of the most imaginative of all post-Darwinian fantasies, that to be found in Hardy's *Pair of Blue Eyes*. [. . .]

Incidentally, one wonders why it is that no art historian seems to have offered the genre paintings of the Pre-Raphaelite period or even the popular engravings for the Victorian drawing-room as unsuspected sources of Hardy's imagination. He was, after all, much more than a man devoted to a single art. In his diaries and notebooks we are continually aware of his discussions of paintings, architecture, music and even the problems of modern philosophy as discussed in the distinguished periodical, *Mind*. It seems to me quite possible that these magazine engravings with their almost operatic emotions could to some degree have influenced the drama of some of the stories which he wrote for just such illustration. The one reprinted on p. 105 is one example among the many that have never been reprinted.

Dr Williams continually seeks to dismiss the image of Hardy as a

pessimist. There is, of course, no doubt that the tragic novels have their bitterness and bleakness, but we tend to ignore the more optimistic side of his character and writings. Where else can we find better and more delightful images of fields, woods and heaths or a more Franciscan love of the animal creation, devoid of sentimentality, in his period? Because it is the expressed aim of this book to draw attention to the positive aspect of his art I have chosen to quote a brief incident in *The Woodlanders*, said to have been his own favourite, and one of the Novels of Character and Environment. That last word arouses in us images of the conservationist and the environmentalist. Hardy anticipates us in this tree-planting episode of *The Woodlander*:

> What he [Giles Winterborne] had forgotten was that there were a thousand young fir trees to be planted in a neighbouring spot which had been cleared by the wood-cutters, and that he had arranged to plant them with his own hands. He had a marvellous power of making trees grow. Although he would seem to shovel in the earth quite carelessly there was a sort of sympathy between himself and the fir, oak, or beech that he was operating on; so that the roots took hold of the soil in a few days. He put most of these roots towards the south-west; for he said, in forty years' time, when some great gale is blowing from that quarter, the trees will require the strongest holdfast on that side to stand against it and not fall.

MAURICE HUSSEY
General Editor

Maurice Hussey died suddenly in June 1991. The Publishers and author would like to pay tribute to his wisdom, inspiration and friendship as Editor of Preface Books. He will be sadly missed.

Preface to the second edition

Since this book was first published, in 1976, Hardy studies have changed drastically. At that time there was no reliable biography and not very much criticism ('Wanted: Good Hardy Critic' was the name of a famous article by Philip Larkin). Arnold Kettle pointed out in a lecture of 1966 (the same year as Larkin's article) that, as with Dickens some time earlier, everyone thought he was a great writer except the highbrows and academics. Hardy had always been enormously popular with the general reader but little serious work was done on him for thirty or forty years after his death.

Now everything is different. There have been two major biographies, by Robert Gittings and Michael Millgate. New books covering almost every aspect of his work come out every year. Novels like *Tess* which were controversial in their time are set texts in schools and universities, where students have voted him one of their favourites (another literary headline was 'Hardy Rules OK'). In his birthplace, Dorset, he is a major tourist attraction, and he has reached a whole new non-literary audience by way of the screen. The popular film of *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1967) was followed by the BBC TV *Mayor of Casterbridge* (1978, now available on video) and Roman Polanski's film *Tess* (1979). There have been many other TV and radio adaptations.

If we have to sum up his appeal in a few words, we may say that he describes an old-fashioned (and therefore 'quaint' and 'picturesque' world) with a modern sensibility. He is somewhere on the shadow–line between nineteenth– and twentieth–century literature; he was born in the early years of Queen Victoria, in a countryside with no railways or electricity and where many people were illiterate, and he lived to see the first great modern war and the first general strike. The Wessex of the novels has gone, but his attitudes to class divisions and education, to war, to religion, to relations between men and women, to animals and 'green' issues, are all likely to strike a chord with today's readers. He is seen as a man born ahead of his time, 'one of us'.

'Women', 'class' – these are words often used as slogans. Hardy is now very popular with feminists, a fact which would have surprised his first wife. However, despite the failure of his first marriage, he always protested publicly against what he called man's inhumanity to woman. He is less popular with some who think him a snob, on the basis of Gittings' *Young Thomas Hardy* (1975) which accused him of concealing his humble origins to make a better

impression on middle-class readers. My own view is that he had little choice. We can hardly imagine the rigidity of class divisions in Victorian England; what distinguishes Hardy from thousands of men who painfully climbed out of the class they were born into is that he understood what was going on and used it to write major novels. Change, progress, conservatism, tradition: these are the raw materials of his work.

Reading over this book, several years after it was first written, I felt I had given too much attention to Hardy's novels (or rather, the Novels of Character and Environment) at the expense of the rest of his work. So I have written a new chapter on the short stories and *The Dynasts* and greatly expanded the one on the poetry. I have also revised Chapter One to take account of what we now know about Hardy the man.

M.W.

To John with love.

'But criticism is so easy, and art so hard: criticism so flimsy, and the life-seer's voice so lasting.'

(Thomas Hardy, writing about William Barnes)

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Part One
The Writer and his Setting

Chronological table

	HARDY'S LIFE	LITERARY AND HISTORICAL EVENTS
1840	Born at Higher Bockhampton, Dorset, 2 June.	
1846		Repeal of Corn Laws.
1847		Railway to Dorchester.
1848		Chartist petition. 'The Year of Revolutions'.
1849	At Isaac Last's school, Dorchester.	
1851		Great Exhibition.
1854		Cholera epidemic in Dorchester.
1856	Apprenticed to architect, John Hicks.	
1858	First poems; friendship with Horace Moule.	
1859		Darwin's *Origin of Species*.
1860–1	Read Greek and helped with church restoration.	
1862	Moved to London to work as assistant architect.	
1865	Planned to train for the Church at Cambridge; gave up plan owing to religious doubts.	

1866		Swinburne's *Poems and Ballads.*
1867	Returned to Dorchester. Began *The Poor Man and the Lady.*	
1870	Met Emma Gifford at St Juliot in Cornwall.	Education Act. Dickens died. Franco-Prussian war.
1871	*Desperate Remedies* published.	
1872	Designed schools for London Board. *Under the Greenwood Tree.*	Joseph Arch's Union. George Eliot's *Middlemarch.*
1873	*A Pair of Blue Eyes.* Suicide of Horace Moule.	
1874	*Far from the Madding Crowd* appeared in *Cornhill Magazine.* Married Emma Gifford in London; they moved to Surbiton.	
1875	*The Hand of Ethelberta.*	
1876–8	Lived in Sturminster Newton, Dorset; wrote *The Return of the Native.*	
1878–80	At Upper Tooting; *The Trumpet-Major.*	
1880–1	Wrote *A Laodicean* during a serious illness.	George Eliot died.
1881	Moved to Wimborne, Dorset.	
1882	Went to Darwin's funeral. *Two on a Tower.*	

1883	Moved permanently to Dorchester; wrote *The Dorsetshire Labourer.*	
1885	*The Mayor of Casterbridge*	
1886		William Barnes died.
1887	*The Woodlanders*	D. H. Lawrence born.
1888	*Wessex Tales*	
1891	*Tess of the d'Urbervilles.*	
1892	Father died.	
1894	*Life's Little Ironies.*	
1895	*Jude the Obscure.*	
1898	*Wessex Poems.*	
1899		Boer War began.
1901	*Poems of the Past and the Present.*	Queen Victoria died.
1902		End of Boer War.
1904	First part of *The Dynasts.*	
1905	Honorary degree from Aberdeen University.	
1906	Second part of *The Dynasts*	Liberals won general election; Labour Party got 30 seats.
1908	Third part of *The Dynasts.*	
1909	*Time's Laughingstocks.* President of Society of Authors.	Swinburne died.

1910	Awarded Order of Merit. First revision of Wessex Novels.	
1912	Emma Hardy died on 27 November.	
1913	Honorary degree from Cambridge University.	
1914	Married Florence Dugdale. *Satires of Circumstance.* On war committee of writers.	Great War began.
1915	Sister Mary died.	
1916	Visited German prisoners of war in Dorchester.	
1917	*Moments of Vision.*	Russian Revolution.
1918		End of war.
1920	Honorary degree from Oxford University.	
1922	*Late Lyrics and Earlier.*	
1925	*Human Shows.* Honorary degree from Bristol University.	
1928	Died, 11 January. *Winter Words* published later the same year.	

1 Hardy's life

Childhood and youth

Thomas Hardy was born on 2nd June 1840, in a small thatched cottage in the hamlet of Higher Bockhampton three miles from Dorchester. It was a picturesque place. There were several quaint-looking houses, with 'trees, clipped hedges, orchards, white gate-post-balls' in the avenue of cherry trees which led to the cottage, and behind it stretched the vast expanse of Egdon or Puddletown Heath. The cottage is still standing, and is used as a Hardy museum, but the other houses, the cherry trees and much of the heath have gone.

Fifty years earlier the heath had come up to the door, and bats had flown in and out of the house when the first Thomas Hardy moved in with his wife. This was the novelist's grandfather. He is said to have used the house for smuggling brandy, a tradition that plays its part in Hardy's story 'The Distracted Preacher'. His son, the second Thomas Hardy, was a skilled violinist and a 'master mason', self-employed in 1840 but later to expand his business and employ other men. They became a modestly well-off family, but his brother remained an ordinary labourer, and his wife, Jemima Hand, had had a deprived childhood:

> By reason of her parent's bereavement and consequent poverty under the burden of a young family, Jemima saw during girlhood and young womanhood some very stressful experiences of which she could never speak in her maturer years without pain, though she appears to have mollified her troubles by reading every book she could lay hands on.
>
> (*The Life of Thomas Hardy*, F.E. Hardy, 1962, p. 8)

Her own mother, a prosperous farmer's daughter, had married a servant, been disinherited and spent the rest of her life in poverty. Class barriers, marriage between classes and the rise and fall of individuals would loom large in the novels of Thomas Hardy.

After moving about Dorset and London working for various families as a cook, Jemima became involved with the young mason and at the end of 1839 found herself pregnant. A marriage was fixed up, and five months later the third Thomas was born. Hardy naturally did not mention these facts, but in 'A Tragedy of Two

Ambitions' he makes the hero discover that 'his father had cajoled his mother in their early acquaintance, and had made somewhat tardy amends. . . . It was the last stroke, and he could not bear it'. As a writer he would show constant sympathy for the illegitimate child.

The mother had a difficult labour, and the baby was thought to be dead at first, but the nurse revived him just in time. There were three more children, Mary, born in 1841 and her brother's special friend, Henry born in 1851 and Katharine in 1856. None of them married, and there were no Hardys in the next generation.

Hardy often seems to have felt that there was something wrong with his family and that it was doomed to die out. At one time the Hardys had been well known in Dorset; one ancestor had founded Hardye's Grammar School in Elizabethan times and another had been the Admiral Hardy who was with Nelson when he died. They had owned a good deal of land, but lost it. Hardy noted in 1888, 'The decline and fall of the Hardys much in evidence hereabout . . . So we go down, down, down', and he would discover that the outside world regarded him and his family as peasants. Possibly that is why he brooded over the decline of ancient families in *The Woodlanders* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and created a family marked down by fate and unfit for marriage in *Jude the Obscure*.

Little Thomas remained a sickly child; for the first few years his parents did not expect him to live and apparently he heard them say so. He was precocious, 'being able to read almost before he could walk, and to tune the violin when of quite tender years'. The musical talent came from his father, the love of words from his mother. She was, he said, 'essentially a literary woman – nearly blinded herself by reading', and she bought him all the books she could afford, for example Dryden's translation of Virgil, Johnson's *Rasselas* and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. He enjoyed dressing up in a tablecloth and reciting services from the prayer book, and everyone thought that as he was no good at anything else he would have to be a parson. The family went regularly to Stinsford church, which Hardy would immortalize under the name of Mellstock, and this church, where many of his ancestors were buried, was 'to him the most hallowed spot on earth':

> In this connection he said once – perhaps oftener – that although invidious critics had cast slurs upon him as Nonconformist, Agnostic, Atheist, Infidel, Immoralist, Heretic, Pessimist, or something else equally opprobrious in their eyes, they had never thought of calling him what they might have called him much more plausibly – churchy; not in an intellectual sense, but in so far as instincts and emotions rule. As a child, to be a parson had