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1

The Conception and Birth of Wessex

Thomas Hardy was born in 1840 in Higher Bockhampton, Dorsetshire. His mother had been a servant and his father was a mason and builder. His mother's was a dominating personality; she was ambitious for her children and was reluctant to lose control of them as they grew up; she had strong views on many subjects and read voraciously. His father was handsome, easy-going and deeply musical. Also living in the family until her death in 1857, was his paternal grandmother, Mary, who had been born in 1772 and was a 'rich oral source of stories, traditions and folklore, as well as recollections of what Hardy came to perceive as the historical past: the period when the threat of a French invasion seemed very real...'¹

Hardy went to school in Dorchester and was subsequently apprenticed to John Hicks, a local architect. After serving his time he moved to London, in 1862, to practice in Arthur Blomfield's office, and was there for five years, until (amongst other things) the London climate eroded his health too severely and he returned to Dorset to work again for Hicks, and then for G R Crickmay of Weymouth who took over Hicks's practice.

While he was in London he began writing verse, and though none of it was published at that time, he retained the manuscripts; and when his first collection, *Wessex Poems*, appeared in 1898, a fair number of them were dated 1866 and 1867. It is impossible to know what relationship the poems finally published in 1898 bore to those completed thirty years earlier, and all we can do is to assume that if not identical, revision of them did not amount to rewriting. Two of these dated early poems that are best known and most anthologized – 'Hap' and 'Neutral Tones' – are in their way important antecedents to Wessex.

'Hap' is the lament of a person who would find it easier to deal with personal disaster if it had been engineered by a malicious divine agent against whom he could direct his resentment, rather than by those 'purblind doomsters', 'Crass Casualty' and 'dicing Time'. It is painful to understand that pure chance is the only cause of sorrow or joy. Throughout the

development of Wessex the question of what causes things to happen there the way they do is of primary importance.

'Neutral Tones' is still more suggestive. It begins:

We stood by a pond that winter day,
And the sun was white, as though chidden of God,
And a few leaves lay on the starving sod;
– They had fallen from an ash, and were gray.

And ends:

Since then, keen lessons that love deceives,
And wrings with wrong, have shaped to me
Your face, and the God-curst sun, and a tree,
And a pond edged with grayish leaves.

To anyone familiar with Hardy's work the idea underlying the poem is a commonplace one, found in his novels from *Desperate Remedies* to *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*.² Once a place or an object is associated with an intensely felt emotion it becomes permanently significant; it forever carries a weight of personal history. Naturally, everywhere in the inhabited world is capable of holding such significance for someone; we all love and hate and weep and pray and curse and die in particular places. So when Hardy came to write novels he found that, at the heart of narrative, feeling could not be divorced from environment, and consequently neither could character nor could plot. No Victorian novelist could have written a placeless plot, but for Hardy place (natural or man-made) had a more profound significance than for other writers. What we see is that, as he compiled invented plots, gradually the less personal, more public ideas of the significance of place also became important: he saw the power within family fanes, local pieties and parish histories and within the marks that distinguish a county or a region, like language and work-practices. Thus personal history gradually sponsors public history. The development of Wessex, in this account, is a matter of Hardy making connections from his own intense perception, of the sort expressed so vividly in 'Neutral Tones', to an increasingly more general application – from individuals to community; from small community to larger; and ultimately to the largest community that was, in his mind, able to support the name.

Another way of coming at a similar understanding is through an idea that finds its clearest expression in comments the narrator of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* makes about Tess Durbeyfield:

At times her whimsical fancy would intensify natural processes around her till they seemed a part of her own story. Rather they became a part of

it; for the world is only a psychological phenomenon, and what they seemed they were.

Or at least 'what they seemed they were' to her; but the narrator has also a finger on what readers are asked to accept as an objective reality:

this encompassment of her own characterization, based on shreds of convention, peopled by phantoms and voices antipathetic to her, was a sorry and mistaken creation of Tess's fancy – a cloud of moral hobgoblins by which she was terrified without reason. It was they that were out of harmony with the actual world, not she. (XIII)

We may, if we make the effort to set aside the authority of the narrative voice, argue that this objective reality is in fact no less subjective than Tess's 'mistaken creation'; but for the purpose of gaining an insight into the development of Wessex, the assumed dualism is valuable, for in studying Hardy's work chronologically, we see that what begins as an individual world imaginatively constructed from places of personal importance to him, is gradually, but with increasing emphasis, modified by connection with the external world of apparently objective reality. At any rate, this study provides the detail by which such an argument may be judged.

Hardy could not get his poems published, and, besides, he was well aware that as a poet he would have to subsidize his writing by architecture. Writing was a pleasure, or a necessity for him, and to anyone with half an eye on the literary marketplace it was clear that the most profitable form of successful writing was fiction. So as soon as he left London in 1867, he began work on the manuscript that would eventually be submitted to a number of publishers in 1868 and 1869 as *The Poor Man and the Lady; By the Poor Man*. The manuscript was accepted by Chapman and Hall, but ultimately withdrawn by Hardy, and no trace remains of the text as it stood. The title, however, embodies another essential element of Wessex: a perpetual awareness of class-distinctions; and what we can gather of the narrative from a variety of sources makes it clear that class-conflict was a central thematic strand in the novel. It is also evident that contrasts were drawn in *The Poor Man and the Lady* between rural and urban life, initiating what would ultimately be another important aspect of Wessex, the idea that it provides an opposite pole to the metropolis: that Wessex gains a significant part of its meaning by being not-London.

On the advice of George Meredith, who had read *The Poor Man and the Lady* for Chapman, Hardy abandoned his first novel, and decided to write instead a somewhat sensational mystery story. He borrowed a number of passages from the earlier novel, as Pamela Dalziel has shown (and probably used other episodes now unidentifiable), and he also prosed some of his unpublishable poems.³ He wrote *Desperate Remedies* quickly, submitting

most of the manuscript to Macmillan early in 1870, who again turned it down. Eventually William Tinsley took it and it was published anonymously in March 1871.

Hardy began his public mediation between the world as psychological phenomenon and the world as objective reality by fabricating for *Desperate Remedies* a fictional environment from materials that were close at hand near Dorchester and Weymouth.

However, before I can continue with this analysis I have to interject an essential observation: the last part of the previous sentence, straightforward and unexceptionable as it is nowadays, contains a dilemma intrinsic to this study. I need both to know and not to know such information. I need to be able to be a contemporary reader of the novel's first edition, but also to understand details of Hardy's transformations of topographical realities that would be unavailable to such a contemporary reader. It has seemed therefore worthwhile, for the sake of distinguishing between the perceptions of the twenty-first-century student and the nineteenth-century reader, to invent the notebooks and diaries of Lucy Stowe. The majority of Hardy's early readers will have lived in London (less than four hundred copies of *Desperate Remedies* were sold in 1871, and most of those went to Mudie's huge lending library), and very few would have had more than a passing curiosity about the setting of the narrative. Lucy Stowe, aged fourteen in 1871, was the youngest daughter of a successful barrister and contented widower. She was one of those rare readers for whom the place where any romance occurred was at least as interesting as the story itself. She had been reading parts of *Waverley* as a young girl and in 1871 Scott was her passion. It was not until three years later when, in common with almost everyone else she knew, she began reading *Far From the Madding Crowd* in *Cornhill*, that she became an enthusiast for Hardy, and sought out his earlier novels to read between the *Cornhill* episodes. Her diaries, which I have imagined myself to have inherited, are full of brief comments on all her reading, but *Far From the Madding Crowd* as it developed evidently triggered a powerful response in her sympathetic imagination, and she began to keep a separate notebook for her thoughts about the novel. For the next twenty years, through marriage and other adventures, she maintained this practice as each of Hardy's new fictions were made public; I see these notebooks as ranged on the shelf by my side as I write. The one on *Desperate Remedies* was begun on 6 June 1874, and begins: 'At last Papa has found a copy of "Desperate Remedies," all three volumes bound together, which makes it rather heavy to hold.'

On the first page of the novel she read the following:

Ambrose Graye, a young architect who had just begun the practice of his profession in the midland town of Hocbridge, went to London to spend the Christmas holidays with a friend who lived in Bloomsbury. They had gone up to Cambridge in the same year . . .

There is nothing in this sentence and a half to alert her to anything interesting about the world the novel is to inhabit, except perhaps that Hocbridge is an invented name amongst the English ones. Graye's solicitor, she learnt a little later, practises in reading. The first chapters of *Desperate Remedies*, though, are by way of being a prelude to the action, which begins in earnest when Graye's two children, Owen and Cytherea, travel by train from Hocbridge to Creston, 'a seaport and watering-place in the west of England' (vI cI.5), where Owen hopes to gain employment as a clerk in an architect's office. We know now that Hardy was visualizing Weymouth when writing of Creston, but Lucy had no idea of this. On one page she wrote a list of the place names in the novel:

Creston
Lewborne Bay
Humdon Castle
Galworth
Laystead
Carriford
Knapwater House
Froominster
Chettlewood
Buckshead Hill
Peakhill Cottage
Southampton
Palchurch
Mundsbury

Save Southampton, these are all invented names, fictional places. Lucy's knowledge of the west of England was slight, but she had been to Freshwater in the Isle of Wight for a holiday with her family, and they had travelled by rail from London to catch the ferry from Lymington, so she noted a pleasant sense of familiarity when characters in *Desperate Remedies* also travelled to Southampton and to London along some of the same track. This led her to look for Creston along the coast westward from Southampton on a map, but she could not find it. 'It is curious, is it not' she wrote, 'that fictional places and real should be together like this in a story.' But then on the opposite page there is the addendum 'I see that Mr Hardy does this again in the latest episode of "Far From the Madding Crowd" when Bathsheba goes to Bath. Perhaps he likes to give us a point of reference we will recognize – though both are a good many miles from where the action mostly happens.' And underneath this is squeezed in: 'Plymouth in "A Pair of Blue Eyes" too.' Apparently she did no more detective work in 1874, but there was one name in her list that might have helped her, had she been sufficiently interested at that stage, to relate what Hardy described to the map of England. Aside from Creston, the most important town in *Desperate Remedies* is Froominster;

it has the county gaol, the county bank, a corn exchange and a considerable market, while the local newspaper is called the *Froominster Chronicle*. Though nowhere called the county town, it has all the attributes of one, and if Lucy had looked on her map westward from Southampton, she must soon have come across Dorchester, a county town on the banks of the river Frome (pronounced Froom, and so spelled by Hardy almost invariably).

This might have done no more than pique her curiosity; but for readers reasonably well acquainted with Dorchester, the various details of Hardy's description of Froominster would have left them in no doubt that Dorchester was the model (they might also have cited the High Street leading to a bridge that separated town from country, or the fact that the newspaper published in Dorchester was called the *Dorset County Chronicle*). Thus it seems necessary, indeed, to predicate not two, but three classes of readers for the first edition of *Desperate Remedies*: those with at best a passing interest in the environment of the novel (most readers); those, like Lucy, with a stronger interest stimulated by Hardy's detailed descriptions of place, distance and geographical relationship, but without the local knowledge necessary to begin to make connections on the ground; and those (few indeed) with both the interest and the knowledge. (That there was at least one such reader, however, was made clear in 1876; but more of him in due course.)

Once Froominster had been identified with Dorchester by this last kind of reader, all sorts of questions would arise for him, if he had a curious mind. Creston has nothing about it that would prevent it from being based on Weymouth, but what of Carriford and Knapwater House? Knapwater House is a 'country mansion about fifteen miles off' (vI cIV.1) from Creston, and a mile or so from a railway station at Carriford Road. If the railway in the novel is the railway in Dorset, then fifteen miles from Weymouth reaches nearly to Wareham, and there is no village and house at that kind of distance that conforms even approximately to Hardy's descriptions, and even the informed local reader would come to a dead end, despite the wealth of information offered in the narrative. Lucy spent some pages trying to organize all the distances and directions into some sort of coherence, but eventually gave up in mock-despair. She wrote: "Take this passage:

Manston was wearing his old garden-hat, and carried one of the monthly magazines under his arm. Immediately they had passed the gateway he branched off and went over the hill in a direction away from the church, evidently intending to ramble along, and read as the humour moved him. The lady meanwhile turned in the other direction, and went along the church path.

Owen resolved to make something of this opportunity. He hurried along towards the church, doubled round a sharp angle, and came back upon the other path, by which Mrs. Manston must arrive. (vIII cV.1)

The important thing here, as it so often seems to be, is the lay of the land, and yet it isn't at all made clear, especially when taken in combination with other paths and roads so fully but incompletely described before. I think Mr Hardy had the whole landscape for miles around vividly present to his mind as he was writing, and gave all the details necessary to follow the movements of the characters at any given moment, but in doing so forgot that the background, so clear to him, was quite opaque to me, so that a passage like this is lit up by the lantern-beam of his description, but the surrounding country is in darkness. I know, for instance, that the church is on the turnpike road that runs through Carriford, opposite the burnt-out ruins of the Inn, but I have never been able to see how one gets from the old Manor to the church. In most novels it wouldn't matter, because there is so much less detail of this sort; but here I long to see it all with Mr Hardy's inner eye; he doesn't leave me the freedom to imagine a scene of my own, but he doesn't fulfil the expectations he arouses. Perhaps no writer could, and still tell a story. I don't know.'

Well, now we recognize, what would have been very hard to understand in 1871, that Knapwater was a version of Kingston Maurward, the big house of Hardy's birth parish of Stinsford, one he knew well from his childhood. The building and its immediate grounds are described in the novel with some accuracy – but it is more like nine or ten miles from Weymouth than fifteen. And when the relationship of the house to the village and church of Carriford is in question, or the relationship of Carriford to the surrounding towns and villages of Froominster, Palchurch and Mundsburly, then it soon becomes clear that Hardy was writing to disguise his borrowings as much as he could. This is the explanation for the impossibility of making a coherent map of the action of the novel. Much that he writes is in detail a recollection of a place or a journey he knew well, but it is placed in an unfamiliar or invented context.⁴

Nevertheless there are clues for an intimately informed reader. When the Three Tranters Inn, which Hardy placed in the middle of his imagined village, burns down, one consequence of the conflagration is the presumption that a Mrs Manston burns with it:

Two days later the official inquiry into the cause of her death was held at the Traveller's Rest Inn, before Mr. Floy, the coroner, and a jury of the chief inhabitants of the district. The little tavern – the only remaining one in the village – was crowded (vII cIII.2)

There was a small inn called the Traveller's Rest (also the original of *The Quiet Woman* in *The Return of the Native*), on the road from Stinsford to Tincton (the same place appears in Hardy's poem 'Weathers'). Here, however, the pub is 'in' Carriford, and the name is common enough; but my hypothetical reader would also have known, and a glance at a contemporary

directory for the district tells us, that John Floyer MP lived in the village of West Stafford, hardly two miles from the Traveller's Rest across the Frome valley. Evidently Hardy was having fun. If Mr Floyer read the book, he, for one, would have made the topographical connections, and recognized the borrowings, displacements and disguises.

Before being burnt down, the inn had already been deprived of much of its function as a staging post by the arrival in the neighbourhood of a railway line. As a matter of fact, there has never been a station associated with Kingston Maurward, though the line east from Dorchester does run just across the Frome meadows south of the house, and an imaginary station in Floyer's village of West Stafford would be the right distance away. However, when Cytherea Graye was driven from Carriford Road station to the house, it was along a turnpike road, the same that goes past the Three Tranters; there has never been any such major road running north-south from the railway. And on a larger scale the railway produces similar problems once Froominster is approximated to Dorchester. Indeed, there is no way of reconciling all the information about directions and distances that Hardy provides, of drawing a map which will satisfy all conditions – something that will eventually come to seem unusual in a Hardy novel.⁵ At this early stage in his writing, though, he was torn three ways, between the desire to delineate vividly and precisely, the need to write places he knew intimately, and a cautious sense that over all a veil of disguise would be prudent if he did not wish to upset family, friends and neighbours.

Here I want to make a distinction between what might be called narrow Wessex and broad Wessex, between the matters of topography so far examined in relation to *Desperate Remedies*, and the sense of Wessex as an imaginatively conceived and coherent world in which, life is lived according to certain conditions and in certain ways that are not characteristic of the mundane world in general, and not always of that part of the world upon which Hardy based Wessex. The two aspects of Wessex are interdependent, but they grew at different rates as Hardy developed his ideas. Much of the broader Wessex might also be understood as the creation and development of Wessex's society and culture; by the time he was writing *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* this had become a very wide-ranging subject indeed, but in *Desperate Remedies*, written well before any idea of Wessex had emerged from Hardy's creative mind, there are not so many topics to consider. All of them, though, will become constant elements in his design of Wessex once that place is established.

The first of these is work. There *are* people in Wessex who do no work or whom we do not see working; but they are few – the landowners, like Cytherea Aldclyffe in this novel, the daughters of well-off families, like Grace Melbury in *The Woodlanders*, or the unemployed and the old. By the time Hardy had finished writing fiction Lucy had some understanding of the nature of very many rural occupations, and an understanding of their place and significance in

Wessex. In *Desperate Remedies* much of Hardy's attention is given to the working out of his complicated plot concerning a small group of middle-class people. We do not see Owen Graye at work as an architect's clerk; his sister Cytherea makes a half-hearted attempt to be a lady's maid, but she is too independent-minded, has been brought up too fully to see herself in the middle class, for her to endure more than a day in that role. Manston is reported as going about some of the business of an estate steward. But there is not much room in the narrative for the working classes. The one extended passage of labour, which could well stand as a model for most of the accounts of work done in subsequent novels, is the wringing down of apples for cider:

Edward Springrove the elder, the landlord, now more particularly a farmer, and for two months in the year a cider-maker, was an employer of labour of the old school, who worked himself among his men. He was now engaged in packing the pomace into horsehair bags with a rammer, and Gad Weedy, his man, was occupied in shovelling up more from a tub at his side. The shovel shone like silver from the action of the juice, and ever and anon, in its motion to and fro, caught the rays of the declining sun and reflected them in bristling stars of light. (vI cVIII.3)

The passage as a whole (of which this is a fragment) is by no means a manual nor is it a full account of the process; but it gives a sense of the life within the work, the occasional beauty of it. There is no emphasis on the strenuousness required to perform it, but on the other hand the work is not idealized. Springrove does pack the bags, a whole group of villagers strains at the screw of the press, compressing the apples and expelling the juice. But at the same time it is evident that this is a communal occasion; Farmer/Innkeeper Springrove presumably pays Weedy 'his man', but we don't know if the others are in his temporary employ, or whether they will be rewarded for their assistance in kind, or whether they lend a hand out of good fellowship, the day being fine and the work not particularly arduous. The scene is a long way from Tess Durbeyfield swede-hacking in the winter rain at Flintcomb-Ash.

A second aspect of Wessex culture might be described as the operation of local customs and traditions. Most readers of Hardy will think in this context of club-walking or mumming or skimmity-riding, but in *Desperate Remedies* there is an instance that in one way is more interesting still:

'No – don't, please, Cytherea,' said Edward, softly. 'Come and sit down with me.'

'O yes. I ought to have asked *you to*,' she returned, timidly. 'Everybody sits in the chimney-corner in this parish. You sit on that side. I'll sit here.'
(VIII cII.2)

Cytherea here is distinguishing between the customs of different parishes – aware of something that is done in Palchurch but not in Carriford, say. This implies a stronger parish identity and a greater degree of separation between parishes than is usually found in Hardy, except where the local bands of musicians are concerned. The ringing of the church bells at the end of the novel might perhaps also be thought of as a customary activity, one that has in common with the apple-pressing mentioned before the pleasure of a communal enterprise.

Then there is class. No novel of Hardy's is exempt from considerations of class; indeed it seems a justifiable generalization to say that almost no English novel is exempt from such considerations. But, as is by now well-understood, Hardy is particularly sensitive to the issue, and sharply aware of the small distinctions in rural society that distinguish several social gradations, where a casual middle-class urban visitor would, if pressed, distinguish one, or none. Hardy also, as the vestiges of *The Poor Man and the Lady* suggest, and as *The Hand of Ethelberta* in particular confirms, has strongly held opinions about class-hostility and the reasons for it. In *Desperate Remedies*, for instance, Edward Springrove, the innkeeper's son, speaks to the landowner Cytherea Aldclyffe as an equal, and the narrator comments:

Miss Aldclyffe, like a good many others in her position, had plainly not realised that a son of her tenant and inferior, could have become an educated man, who had learnt to feel his individuality, to view society from a Bohemian stand-point, far outside the farming grade in Carriford parish, and that hence he had all a developed man's unorthodox opinion about the subordination of classes. (vII cIII.4)

Which reads very much like an autobiographical experience.

From the first, too, Hardy worked with the question of how to represent the indigenous speech of the district. On the whole in *Desperate Remedies* Hardy gives strong indications of accent, and a certain amount of deviation from the grammar of standard English, but not much in the way of lexical variation. This is Gad Weedy, who has the richest local pronunciation: 'Whilst Master Teddy Springrove has been daddlen, and hawken, and spetten about having her, she's quietly left him all forsook' (vII cV.2).⁶

These are all facets of Dorset life that Hardy observed and thought important as early as *Desperate Remedies*. There are also some characteristics of Hardy's own habitual pattern of thought that become as much an element of Wessex as the landscape or the agricultural labour. One instance of this, as I have already noted, is a nexus of ideas about causality, about the validity of concepts like fate, destiny, chance, Hap, providence (divine or otherwise), or the immanent will, when balanced with human agency, intentional or otherwise. It is an issue that many Victorian writers address, but none so richly or insistently as Hardy, not even George Eliot, to whom on occasion Hardy alludes in this

respect. And the debate in Hardy's mind becomes an issue for Wessex and its people, placed there by narrator after narrator, in every novel, most notably in *The Dynasts*, and in dozens of poems, so that it becomes part of the Wessex air they breathe. It is so even in *Desperate Remedies*:

'I used to think 'twas your wife's fate not to have a liven husband when I sid 'em die off so,' said Gad.

'Fate? Bless thy simplicity, so 'twas her fate; but she struggled to have one, and would, and did. Fate's nothen beside a woman's schemen!'

'I suppose, then, that Fate is a He, like us, and the Lord, and the rest o' em up above there,' said Gad, lifting his eyes to the sky (vI cVIII.3).

Hardy was always responsive to criticism, and an important element in charting the development of Wessex is the voice of the reviewer. It will be seen that though the notices of *Desperate Remedies* were mixed, embryonic Wessex, as I have outlined it above, was well received:

The characters are often exceedingly good. The parish clerk, 'a sort of Bowdlerised rake', who refers to the time 'before he took orders', is really almost worthy of George Eliot, and so is the whole cider-making scene at the end of the first volume. The west-country dialect is also very well managed, without being a caricature. (*Athenaeum* 1 April 1871)⁷

This nameless author has, too, one other talent of a remarkable kind – sensitiveness to scenic and atmospheric effects, and to their influence on the mind, and the power of rousing similar sensitiveness in his readers. (*Spectator* 22 April 1871)

... the sketch of [old Springrove] ... reminds us of the close and truthful drawing in Mr. Barnes's delightful *Dorset Poems* and *Hwomely Rhymes*. ... We may add that a familiarity with several kinds of manual work adds great point to the author's natural power of vivid description. (*Saturday Review* 30 September 1871)

By contrast with *Desperate Remedies*, Hardy's next novel had barely any plot at all, though it had more in the first edition than it had initially in the manuscript. This time, when Hardy again sent them his manuscript, Macmillan were interested but not really excited; they did not offer to publish *Under the Greenwood Tree* at once, and after waiting a few months for further news, Hardy offered the manuscript to William Tinsley, who had been the man finally to publish *Desperate Remedies*. Tinsley offered £30 for the copyright, and Hardy accepted; it was a sum that would at least cover the loss he had incurred over his first novel. *Under the Greenwood Tree* came out in two volumes in June 1872. Again he used some material from *The Poor Man and*

the Lady, and again he used his own parish as the centre of the novel, though in a quite different way. In *Desperate Remedies* he had taken details from south central Dorset and placed them in a totally fictional relationship with each other and the railway line that runs through the county to Weymouth. For *Under the Greenwood Tree* Hardy imagined almost all of the action taking place within a few miles of his birthplace, but gave in the text very few hints that he had done so. This is how Mellstock, the parish that is at the heart of the action, is described:

Mellstock was a parish of considerable acreage, the hamlets composing it lying at a much greater distance from each other than is ordinarily the case. . . . There was East Mellstock, the main village; half a mile from this were the church and the vicarage, called West Mellstock, and originally the most thickly-populated portion. A mile north-east lay the hamlet of Lewgate, where the tranter lived; and at other points knots of cottages, besides solitary farmsteads and dairies. (I.iv)

If the names were changed this would accurately describe Stinsford, but the account of the journeys across the parish the choir makes as they play and sing carols is carefully anonymous, and no one but Hardy would know where he had in mind. When Budmouth first enters Hardy's work in this novel, there was nothing that might have made Lucy think of Weymouth.⁸ The environment is prominent in the novel, the places people live, the paths they take, the country they travel through are all so vividly given that any reader might say to herself, as Lucy Stowe did, that surely this is a real place; but no hint is given her of where the real place might be. Indeed Hardy again inserts deliberate elements of disguise, as for instance when the vicar, walking from Mellstock to the nearby town Casterbridge, goes across 'dale and heath'; but of course it is only possible to know that this is disguise when the reality behind the fiction is made clear later in Hardy's development of Wessex. For Hardy the story could only have resonance, value – could, indeed only be written – if it was set in the place in which the actual choir at the centre of the narrative had sung and played; but at the same time he was not anxious for anyone else to know this.⁹ All Lucy could do was admire and wonder.

On the other hand, she did notice some connections between *Desperate Remedies* and *Under the Greenwood Tree*. She caught the fact that both are set in cider-producing districts, and she copied this comment by Keeper Day on his wife, adding: 'I remember something quite like this about the clerk's wife in "Desperate Remedies", though I can't find it just now' (the interested reader will find it above p. 11):

'There's that wife o' mine. It was her doom not to be nobody's wife at all in the wide universe. But she made up her mind that she would, and did

it twice over. Doom? Doom is nothing beside a elderly woman – quite a chiel in her hands’ (II.vi).¹⁰

‘Mr Hardy makes you hear things you’ve never noticed before,’ Lucy also noted, before quoting the opening of *Under the Greenwood Tree*: ‘It goes with that passage I copied from “Desperate Remedies” about the different sounds rain makes.’¹¹ At the end of her notes on the novel Lucy commented, “‘Under the Greenwood Tree’ is like what I have read so far of “Far From the Madding Crowd” in that I have learned much about the right way to do things in the country, like tapping a cider-barrel, making a shoe, or hiving bees (or visiting a member of the superior classes, for that matter, I suppose).’

In *Under the Greenwood Tree* we watch the rapid and ill-motivated extirpation of the church musicians from their time-honoured posts. The members of the Mellstock choir regret very much their dismissal, and though they all accept that the vicar has the right in his own shop to order business as he chooses, still some feel sufficiently rebellious to suggest staying away from church on the Sunday of their supersession. And there are later in the novel other evidences of change in the rural community of no fixed place that is Mellstock, straws in the wind. There is a discussion about what will happen after the marriage service of Dick and Fancy:

‘And then, of course, when ‘tis all over,’ continued the tranter, ‘we shall march two and two round the parish.’

‘Yes, sure,’ said Mr. Penny: ‘two and two: every man hitched up to his woman, ‘a b’lieve.’ . . .

‘Respectable people don’t nowadays,’ said Fancy. ‘Still, since poor mother did, I will’ (V.i).

During her teacher-training in London, Fancy has been exposed to and has accepted as normative, the current social conventions of the urban middle-class; the word that captures the spirit of her responses to the ‘immemorial’ local customs is ‘respectable’. Family piety, allied to the overwhelming confirmation of local practice by everyone else except her compliant husband-to-be, ensures for the moment the survival of the wedding tour of the district, and the strength of the old to assimilate the new without losing its identity seems possibly sufficient; but with the railway connection to London – so prominent in *Desperate Remedies* – only a few years away from the world of *Under the Greenwood Tree*, it is evident (though it did not strike Lucy) that the survival of the traditional will at best be precarious.

It is possible to argue from a historical perspective that every generation feels, when a number of things that have been familiar since their grandparents’ youth disappear or are destroyed, that a way of life that has existed from time out of mind is threatened or is falling apart. Hardy here, and in

narratives to follow, makes us share this feeling and recognize its power – that if experience and memory force people to respond thus, then the response is real and active in their lives, and it does not diminish its force to call such an understanding an illusion. On the other hand some of Hardy's multiple narrative voices are more objective, sometimes commenting directly or indirectly on the limited and subjective nature of the characters' responses, sometimes suggesting (more often in later work) that the nineteenth century, and in particular the half-century from 1840–90, did indeed mark the decisive decline of many of the particular ways of life embodied in Wessex, some of which had existed (not, of course, unmodified) for several centuries.

A final note suggestive of the future: it may be no more than a coincidence that a character in *Desperate Remedies*, of whom we know nothing but his name, is called John Day. A very sharply attentive reader, who remarked upon whatever else there was in common between *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *Desperate Remedies*, might possibly have said to herself on reading of Fancy Day and her family, that perhaps John was her cousin – though in fact Lucy did not.

When *Under the Greenwood Tree* was published, Hardy was working in London again as an architect, and an encounter with his publisher led to him agreeing to provide a serial for *Tinsley's Magazine*, his first attempt in that form. He had very little of the novel written, and he had rapidly to learn the business of writing against continual printer's deadlines. His need to shape the detail of his narrative out of what was immediate to him was a help in this respect. In 1870 he had gone to St Juliot in North Cornwall to execute a church-restoration commission for Crickmay, and had fallen in love with the rector's sister-in-law, Emma Gifford. There is a significant autobiographical element in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, and again we now are well aware that the environment he created for the novel was a version of one he had become intimately familiar with.

Though Hardy nowhere stated as much in the novel, the combination of the dramatic cliff-bound coastline, names like St Eval's and St Kyr's, and the intervention of Plymouth as a terminal port and railway station between London and that coast meant that contemporary readers who were interested had sufficient information to identify at least the county of the main action of the story. Hardy is once again precise but selective in local detail and sufficiently imprecise in broader topographical relationships to make a close identification impossible. There is a certain amount of disguise, as in earlier novels, and also a couple of outright topographical anomalies. This is Mrs Smith talking of Elfride Swancourt to her son Stephen: 'I see her sometimes decked out like a horse going to Binegar fair, and I admire her for't. A perfect little lady' (vI.cX). Binegar is in the Mendips in Somerset, and it is marginally possible that Binegar horse fair was as well known so far away as Cornwall as it was in Dorset. However a second occurrence of a real name of significance

in Dorset rather than Cornwall renders another explanation more probable. The speaker is again Mrs Smith: 'We used to go looking for even-ashes together in Benvill Lane' (vIII cIX). Benvill Lane is in Dorset, south of Toller Down. Tess Durbeyfield walks along it to and from Emminster.¹² Now *A Pair of Blue Eyes* was written under considerable time pressure as a serial story in *Tinsley's Magazine*, and it is certain that Hardy again made use of significant fragments of *The Poor Man and the Lady* to pad out his invention. This is the case with some of the London scenes, and it seems most likely that these two occurrences of English names of places far to the east of the supposed site of the story, in the speech of this one character, come from the same source. Both were removed when the novel was reprinted in one volume in 1877. When Lucy Stowe read *A Pair of Blue Eyes* she was as sure as she had been with the earlier novels that Hardy had a real place in mind, and was paying close attention to this aspect of the narrative for hints, but her knowledge of Dorset and Somerset was much too slender for her to have picked up these details.

On the other hand she did see that Hardy was liberal with what she called travel-guide descriptions. Amongst others she noted that when Knight went to Brittany, he did so 'by way of Weymouth, Jersey and St. Malo', (vIII cII) and thus, though she could not yet make the connection, in Hardy's first three novels the first of these places was known by three different names: Creston, Budmouth and Weymouth.

There is one place name in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, though, that indicates the beginning of an idea at the heart of Wessex; it occurs in a passage in which Stephen Smith is describing his previous life to Elfride Swancourt:

I have not lived here since I was nine years old. I then went to live with my uncle, a blacksmith, near Casterbridge, in order to be able to attend a national school as a day scholar; there was none in this remote part then. (vI cVIII)

The choice in the first edition of *A Pair of Blue Eyes* of Casterbridge as the town in which Smith had his education is striking. For readers familiar with details of Hardy's life it adds an extra element to the already clear autobiographical strain in the novel; and this repetition Lucy did notice, especially since the name had already occurred in the serial of *Far From the Madding Crowd* that she was reading at the same time, as well as in *Under the Greenwood Tree*, and she commented: 'I had thought Mellstock and Casterbridge to be further east than this seems to suggest, but it is most interesting to feel that in some way the two earlier stories are also connected in their imaginary worlds.' Lucy did not read the serial version of *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, or she might also have noticed, since her mind was already on such things, that in *Tinsley's Magazine* Smith's uncle lived near Exeter rather than Casterbridge. The fact that Hardy made this change to Casterbridge in revising proof for the first edition, when at the same time he was writing Casterbridge into the early

manuscript leaves of *Far From the Madding Crowd*, implies a deliberate motive, and there is justification for speaking of a first conscious gesture towards the embryonic Wessex.

Since substantial chunks of the novel are borrowed or adapted from *The Poor Man and the Lady*, it is scarcely surprising that *A Pair of Blue Eyes* should derive much of its character from the vein in Hardy that led him to write the unpublished novel. In particular he revisits ideas about the essential differences between rural and metropolitan life, and there is also a perpetual undertone, sometimes foregrounding itself, of class distinction and class-hostility. Lucy commented particularly on the second of these, noting the novel's community in spirit in this respect with *Desperate Remedies*. She only quoted, though, the most flagrant piece of bigotry, which is in the vicar Mr Swancourt's voice, after he has learned that Stephen Smith, whom he had welcomed into his house, is the son of a mason in his parish:

'What the deuce could I be thinking of! He, a villager's son; and we, Swancourts. We have been coming to nothing for centuries, and now I believe we have got there. What shall I next invite here, I wonder! . . . It is not enough that I have been deluded and disgraced by having him here, – the son of one of my village peasants – but now I am to make him my son-in-law! Heavens above us, are you mad, Elfride?' (vI cIX)

The underlinings are Lucy's, made without further comment.

Lucy came to think about the contrasts between London and country life through this speech of Elfride:

there are beautiful women where you live . . . And you will look at them, not caring at first, and then you will look and be interested, and after a while you will think, 'Ah, they know all about city life, and assemblies, and coteries, and the manners of the titled, and poor little Elfie, with all the fuss that's made about her having me, doesn't know about anything but a little house and a few cliffs and a space of sea, far away.' (vI cX)

'To me Elfride', she wrote, 'sounds rather childish, but she's supposed to be older than I am. But then, I remember, Mr Hardy wrote at the beginning of the novel: "She had lived all her life in retirement . . . and at the age of nineteen or twenty she was no further on in social consciousness than an urban young lady of fifteen" (vI cI). This made me think of Bathsheba in the first episode of "Far From the Madding Crowd":

From the contours of her figure in its upper part, she must have had a beautiful neck and shoulders, but since her infancy nobody had ever seen them. Had she been put into a low dress, she would have run and thrust her head into a bush. Yet she was not a shy girl by any means; it was

merely her instinct to draw the line dividing the seen from the unseen higher than they do it in towns. (vI cIII)

And then there is that lovely piece about Keeper Day's silences in "Under the Greenwood Tree":

'You might live wi' that man, my sonnies, a hundred years, and never know there was anything in him.'

'Ay; one o' these up-country London ink-bottle fellers would call Geoffrey a fool.' (2.v)

There is quite a lot of this sort of thing really in "A Pair of Blue Eyes", like Stephen looking as if he could never get on in London, or the idea (one that would never have occurred to me) that workmen specialise in London, but have to be able to turn their hands to anything in the country; and of course there is more in this month's "Cornhill".'

There are also present in *A Pair of Blue Eyes* the earliest notes of a couple of the social themes of Wessex. For the first time the narrator pays some analytical attention to the perceptions of the agricultural labourer:

To those hardy weather-beaten individuals who pass the greater part of their days and nights out-of-doors, Nature seems to have moods in other than a poetical sense: moods literally and really – predilections for certain deeds at certain times, without any apparent law to govern or season to account for them. They read her as a person with a curious temper. (vII cIX)

The voice in this passage, however, is as yet that of an interpreter mediating between those who get soaked and baked at the hands of nature and those happy ones who only read about such misadventures. There are also the first hints of landlordism:

The only lights apparent on earth were some spots of dull red, glowing here and there upon the distant hills, which . . . were smouldering fires for the consumption of peat and gorse-roots, where the common was being broken up for agricultural purposes. (vI chII)

To the profit of the local landowner and the loss of grazing and turbarry for the peasant, though no such comment is made by Hardy's narrator.

It is possible that when Hardy deliberately linked three novels together through Casterbridge, as noted above, he already had in mind the further unifying detail of an imaginary county; perhaps he was just waiting for the right name. It should at any rate not be surprising that it was in the serialization of *Far From the Madding Crowd* that Hardy first used the word Wessex,

though it came late in the novel, in the penultimate episode, almost slipped in edgewise.

At some time in June or July of 1874 Hardy decided to describe Greenhill Fair as 'the Nijnii Novgorod of Wessex' (vii cXX).¹³ It is ironic, or at any rate surprising, that the first mention of a nineteenth-century Wessex should be in association with a Russian fair-city that would by itself have seemed exotic to metropolitan readers in the 1870s. Lucy's response was 'Where is Nijnii Novgorod? When was Wessex?' And then 'Why did Mr Hardy introduce Wessex here? Is that where the novel is taking place? But it isn't a historical novel like Sir Walter Scott's.' Then she read a little later: 'The great mass of sheep in the fair consisted of South Downs and the old Wessex horned breeds,' and after writing it out, she added 'Perhaps this is the answer, perhaps there are sheep in that part of the country that have been called Wessex sheep since whenever Wessex existed.' So, in a sense she missed the importance of the big moment, but then, no one who wrote about the novel in public remarked on the word at all.

Hardy never explained why he chose Wessex rather than any other name. It is possible, however, to speculate that the close relationship he had already forged between his fiction and observable reality precluded an invented name, and that eventually, after some casting about, he recalled the enthusiasm of the poet and teacher William Barnes, whom he had known as a young man in Dorchester, for Saxon Wessex as the source of the Dorset dialect. It is certain, though, despite his assertion in the 1895 preface to *Far From the Madding Crowd*, that he had at this stage no concept of his Wessex as a region anywhere near as extensive as that covered by the early medieval kingdom.

Lucy, it will be remembered, was reading *Under the Greenwood Tree* at the same time as the serialization of *Far From the Madding Crowd*, and she began to make the connections between the two that Hardy must have wondered if his best readers would make. By the time she had finished she had noted six details the two stories had in common, one character and five places: Keeper Day, Casterbridge, Mellstock, Yalbury Wood, Budmouth and the Three Choughs Inn at Casterbridge. Reviewing what she had found, she wrote: 'It is in the first chapter of "Far From the Madding Crowd" that Gabriel Oak's farm is placed in connection with the Casterbridge of "Under the Greenwood Tree": "The field he was in this morning sloped to a ridge called Norcombe Hill. Through a spur of this hill ran the highway from Norcombe to Casterbridge, sunk in a deep cutting." And then when his sheep are killed he goes to the hiring fair there. Budmouth is fourteen miles from Lewgate and fifteen from Weatherbury. Weatherbury isn't far from Casterbridge, and can't be very far from Mellstock or Lewgate, because Yalbury Wood is near to both, and Joseph Poorgrass of "Far From the Madding Crowd" has been drinking metheglin with Keeper Day who lives there in "Under the Greenwood Tree". But I can't work out how they all relate to each other. It is as if

Mr Hardy isn't quite sure if he wants to bring the worlds of the two stories together or not. I mean, for example, in "Under the Greenwood Tree" Keeper Day lives "in the depths of Yalbury Wood", which is "intersected by a lane at a place not far from the house" (II.vi) while the Yalbury Wood of "Far From the Madding Crowd" is traversed by a turnpike road. I suppose it might be a very large wood, but I don't get the impression that it is from either novel.'

Lucy's uncertainties were not shared by at least one equally acute and sensitive reader of *Far From the Madding Crowd*, and though he has left no record of his initial response to any of these novels, there is no doubt that Kegan Paul, Dorset man, clergyman, essayist and publisher, recognized some of the places Hardy described, and knew well the kind of people he based his characters on. In 1874 Paul (then forty six) resigned the living of Sturminster Marshall in Dorset, after being vicar there for twelve years, and two years later wrote the article that blew Wessex wide open (see below pp. 23-4). Let me hypothesize his response to Hardy's topography in *Far From the Madding Crowd*.

Paul made the connection between Hardy's Weatherbury and Weatherbury Castle, an earthwork on a hill just outside Milborne St Andrew and some three and a half miles north-east of Puddletown.¹⁴ At first he thought Hardy must have had Milborne in mind, but as details accumulated he began, tentatively, to favour the latter as source; amongst them was a vivid memory of the old Buck's Head Inn near Yellowham Wood. Paul was quite clear, though, that Casterbridge was a version of Dorchester, and he also saw that for some reason Hardy had reversed the town when sending Fanny Robin to the workhouse there. Here is a small example:

'One mile more,' the woman murmured. 'No; less,' she added, after a pause. 'The mile is to the Town Hall, and my resting-place is on this side Casterbridge. Three-quarters of a mile, and there I am!' (vII cX)

The Workhouse in Dorchester, however, was on the other, western side of the town from Puddletown or Milborne, out on Damer's Road towards Bridport. When Joseph Poorgrass comes to collect Fanny's body from the same place, Hardy gives the name of the church that would be heard if the workhouse were at the east end of the town – St George's Church in Fordington. To complicate matters still further Hardy also reverses the direction that a cart would take from Dorchester to Puddletown:

The afternoon drew on apace, and, looking to the left towards the sea as he walked beside the horse, Poorgrass saw strange clouds and scrolls of mist rolling over the high hills which girt the landscape in that quarter. (vII cXII)

Paul could not know that in the manuscript of the novel, Hardy originally wrote 'to the right', and then replaced it with 'to the left'.

Weatherbury is not described in any detail, just a few of the significant buildings, the church, the malthouse, and Bathsheba's farm on the edge (the original of which, as Hardy's 1912 preface explains, was not in any case in Puddletown itself), but Hardy amused himself and puzzled Paul by adding an ironic element of disguise when he described the malthouse:

In the ashpit was a heap of potatoes roasting, and a boiling pipkin of charred bread, called 'coffee,' for the benefit of whomsoever should call, for Warren's was a sort of village clubhouse, there being no inn in the place. (vI cXV)

In fact there were five pubs in Puddletown, and Paul knew the village's reputation for heavy drinking.

The old maltster relates, during one of the sessions in his malthouse, the story of his working life. At one place he was only hired for eleven months at a time, to keep him from being a charge on the parish if he were disabled – a characteristic piece of employer chicanery, but it was the name of another of the places he worked at that prompted a comment from Lucy: 'I'm really surprised. No-one could imagine Snoodly-under-Drool to be a real name. It's the kind of name I'd expect to find in novels that treat country life farcically, or speak contemptuously of the countryside, and "Far From the Madding Crowd" certainly does neither.'

As we have seen, Lucy also recognized that both *Under the Greenwood Tree* and *Far From the Madding Crowd* are novels that celebrate the proper way to do things. Proper may mean skilful, may mean appropriate, may mean according to long-established fashion (or all three together), and the later novel abounds with such properly performed tasks, mostly done by Gabriel Oak, with or without assistance. There is, for instance, quite a lot about how to be a shepherd. This is the first insignificant example that Lucy noted:

It came from the direction of a small dark object under the plantation hedge – a shepherd's hut – now presenting an outline to which an uninitiated person might have been puzzled to attach either meaning or use. (vI cII)

She accepted that she was 'an uninitiated person', as were all her friends, but she couldn't quite make up her mind whether she enjoyed being lectured as the narrator went on to do. Passages of overt instruction were rare, she admitted, and the knowledge imparted essential for a full immersion in the alien rural world of the novelist's characters. She noted also the pattern shaped by the novel: the shepherd's year begins with lambing, which we see in two parts, separated by the disaster to Oak's own flock, and from two aspects, the master's and the servant's (Gabriel is not allowed the skins of the dead lambs by the farmer Bathsheba Everdene); then there is the

attempt to make a ewe take another's lamb, then washing, shearing, curing bloated sheep and finally selling them at a sheep fair.

Drawing back a little, the same, she saw, was true of the farming year as a whole; interspersed between the sheep affairs are the other activities on a mixed farm of Bathsheba's sort – haymaking, harvesting various cereals, hiving bees, wringing apples for cider – all ending at Christmas. This was the same seasonal cycle as had informed *Under the Greenwood Tree*.

But what struck Lucy most, what seemed to her, reflecting on all four of Hardy's novels, a keynote of a further stage of rural intensity in his last, was the comparison of the great barn with the church and the castle.

One could say about this barn, what could hardly be said of either the church or the castle, akin to it in age and style, that the purpose which had dictated its original erection was the same with that to which it was still applied. Unlike and superior to either of those two typical remnants of mediaevalism, the old barn embodied practices which had suffered no mutilation at the hands of time. Here at least the spirit of the builders then was at one with the spirit of the beholder now. (vi cXXII)

After inscribing the paragraph of which this is a fragment, Lucy noted: 'It is a strikingly effective and thought-provoking description, but when Mr Hardy writes: "Here at least the spirit of the ancient builders was at one with the spirit of the modern beholder" I must confess I am somewhat concerned at his implied view of the state of Christianity in this country – or at least in his country.' Then she continued, quoting from the same passage:

This picture of to-day in its frame of four hundred years ago did not produce that marked contrast between ancient and modern which is implied by the contrast of date. In comparison with cities, Weatherbury was immutable. . . . In these nooks the busy outsider's ancient times are only old, his old times are still new; his present is futurity.

'Here', Lucy wrote, 'is a statement of permanence, or of relative permanence, to set alongside the story of enforced change that is told in "Under the Greenwood Tree"; and it contrasts too that dialogue between the old maltster and Gabriel Oak about how things are different in Norcombe. I think perhaps Mr Hardy wants me to smile at the maltster's responding to such small changes as the death of an apple tree with "how the face of nations alter", but in the context of such paragraphs as I have just copied out, the phrase seems more consonant not just with his feelings, but with a reality of a different kind from that which I am used to in London. Though perhaps the fact that a young woman is farming at all might justify the maltster's last comment.

'And – I see how much I am learning – I am struck by the idea of telling time without a clock or a watch like Gabriel, or the labourers at Endelstow.

It seems too that the shoemaker in *Under the Greenwood Tree* who claimed that he could recognize people by their feet was only saying what most countrymen would affirm, that the local craftsman has special knowledge and a special way of doing things.

'Bathsheba and Fancy Day have quite a lot in common – after all Bathsheba was educated to be a school-teacher, and so it is not surprising that she brings a new taste to Weatherbury, what the maltster calls her "strange doings". She tells Liddy that "Samplers are out of date – horribly countrified". But at the same time she has been horribly countrified herself; I remember that in the beginning of the novel Mr Hardy says if she had been put into a low dress "she would have run and thrust her head into a bush." She seems to have become a deal more sophisticated in a very short space of time without my particularly noticing the cause.'

One of the reviews of *Far From the Madding Crowd*, perhaps the most thoughtful, is by R H Hutton in the *Spectator*. He identifies Hardy's region for the first time as 'Dorsetshire probably' and says that Hardy has 'mastered' the landscapes and work of the county, to the degree that the reader 'carries away new images, and as it were, new experience, taken from the life of a region before almost unknown'.

Hutton had almost certainly learned that Dorset was Hardy's county from his brother John, who had published reviews himself in the *Spectator* of Hardy's first novels, and had written to Hardy in 1873 what is the earliest surviving enquiry after the reality behind the fiction:

By the bye, will you do me the great favour of telling me what places Endelstow, Stranton, St Kirr's &c really are – and also Mellstock & Lewgate? We know something of North Devon & Tavistock & I have been at Taunton – & these neighbourhoods seem to be the scenes of your tales & yet I do not exactly recognize any real places that I know. I picture places to myself very vividly & get disappointed afterwards when I find I have got wrong – I am rather great in locality & the faculty has its disadvantages – I always want a *map* as a frontispiece to a good novel. (DCM H3531 3 July)

Hardy's reply does not survive, but it is likely that he gave away his secrets.¹⁵

His brother's review goes on, however, to raise an issue which came to be canvassed by critics throughout Hardy's career:

the reader who has any general acquaintance with the civilisation of the Wiltshire or Dorsetshire labourer, with his average wages, and his average intelligence, will be disposed to say at once that a more incredible picture than that of the group of farm-labourers as a whole which Mr Hardy has given us can hardly be conceived . . .

The review is at once highly intelligent and very revealing. Hutton expresses with spirit and even passion the attitudes of the highly educated urban elite. Though he might have denied it, it is his instinctive assumption that every agricultural labourer is a clod, and he has to make a perceptible effort of reason to acknowledge that some few at least of the workfolk in the country, or even the county, must be as Hardy displays them. Hutton warns armchair explorers of this *terra incognita* that, should they venture themselves amongst the natives, they would not be so finely entertained as they are by Hardy's invention, or indeed entertained at all.¹⁶

Hardy's next novel, *The Hand of Ethelberta*, prompted similar attacks. The first notice of Hardy's work to mention Wessex was that in the *Athenaeum*; after quoting part of the dialect-dialogue between an ostler and a milkman at the opening of the novel, the reviewer comments that it: 'might be the language of an ostler in Shakespeare, but would it be heard nowadays at a "Wessex" inn? ... It is said that careful examination failed to detect 200 words in the vocabulary of a certain village in Cambridgeshire; is it possible that Somerset and Dorset are so much more eloquent?' (15 April 1876). The last sentence demonstrates the failure of the middle-class investigator to penetrate the obdurate surface of rural culture, an almost inevitable condition of things, noted by Hardy some years later in 'The Dorsetshire Labourer', and also in an article published in the *Examiner* of 15 July 1876, and headed 'The Wessex Labourer':

Very few, indeed, outside his own rank attain to intimacy with the English labourer; and in Dorset, where the peasant retains a strongly-marked individuality ... the labourer and squire feel towards each other as if they were of different races. ... It is to this population that Mr Hardy introduces us, with rare insight ...

The piece was written by Kegan Paul, and it also contains a thorough defence against the accusation that Hardy's peasants are altogether too eloquent, intelligent and witty to stand as a reasonable likeness of any real peasant that ever existed. He too quotes from the ostler-milkman dialogue, and comments: 'the Wessex man knows that these passages have in them the real ring, all equally true to life and scenery. ... the Dorset labourer is ... no fool in his own line, but rather very shrewd, racy and wise, full of practical knowledge of all natural things, and of considerable powers of thought.'

So Lucy, reading these reviews, and confronted with such contradictory views, presented to her anonymously as was the custom, had to make up her own mind whether Hardy was fantasizing a whole population, or whether he was essentially reflecting a reality to which he had special access. Thus she was already confronting the dilemma of Wessex: is it make-believe, or is it real, or is it something in-between? In the end she felt that the pleasure she

got from the conversation of these people meant that it didn't altogether matter whether their counterparts could be found in Dorset; but the fact that the *Examiner* article was the first to make explicit for her connections between the places in the novels and places in Dorset predisposed her in the author's favour as someone who really knew what he was talking about.

In his topographical revelations Paul was mostly accurate:

'The Hand of Ethelberta,' again, is full of Dorset coast scenery, all recognisable, though distance between places is now and then, for artistic purposes, misstated. But Swanage, Corfe Castle, Bournemouth, Lulworth with its cove and castle, are all there...¹⁷

The part about distances being altered 'for artistic purposes' was comforting to Lucy, whose efforts to work out the environments of *Desperate Remedies* and *Under the Greenwood Tree* had cost such headaches. She was, however, provoked to wonder what particular artistic purposes might be served by such disguise: 'If a reader recognises the places but the distances are wrong, then the result is confusion, isn't it? And if the reader doesn't recognise the places, then the specific distances are no issue. And if, like me, the reader, not recognising the places, tries to work out the interrelationship of the places, and can't because the distances are not only wrong but inconsistently wrong, then the result is worse confusion. Where is the art in that?'

It seems certain that Kegan Paul wrote without Hardy's authority or knowledge to inform Lucy and anyone else who read the piece; but if so, then how did Hardy respond? Was he irritated or pleased? Did he see it as good publicity or an unwarranted stripping of veils he had intentionally placed? He was still playing with the relationship between his own experiences of place and their fictional representation or disguise; and yet *The Hand of Ethelberta* shows that his imagination was beginning to consolidate disparate elements into a larger environment with what he may have begun to think of as a larger purpose.¹⁸

At any rate, Hardy and details of Dorset were definitively brought together in public for the first time in Paul's article. It was unsurprising that the occasion for the essay was the publication of the much abused but recently rehabilitated *The Hand of Ethelberta*, for it is in this novel, and in this novel alone of Hardy's first nine, that Wessex as a geographical space is made prominent. It is present from the first sentence: 'The young Mrs. Petherwin stepped from the door of an old though popular inn in a Wessex town to take a country walk.'

Lucy wrote excitedly on reading it: 'I knew Wessex was going to be important; it's a new county of England, better than Bassetshire I think, or Loamshire and Stonyshire because it tells you where it is, down in the south-west somewhere, even if you didn't know earlier. But then it isn't

necessarily just one county, or at least I don't think it is. Or was. I really shall have to find out.' She noted other occurrences of the word scattered through the novel, and tried to decide exactly what kind of space Wessex was – province? district? county? The form of the address of Ethelberta's family – 'Arrowthorne Lodge, Wessex' – implied a county she thought, but other allusions were unclear: a local newspaper is called the 'Wessex Reflector' (IX), and when Ethelberta Petherwin is discussing musical settings of her poems with acquaintances in London she says: 'It is one which reached me by post only this morning from a place in Wessex, and is written by an unheard-of man who lives somewhere down there ...' (X) This is followed by: 'A deaf gentleman ... declared ... that Wessex was in his judgement as well as hers a very picturesque part of England.'

She discovered that the historical Wessex was a region of some considerable extent; but it did not seem to her that the district encompassed in the novel ranged so wide. There were new place names, Anglebury, Sandbourne, Knollsea, and even before the *Examiner* piece she had worked out that Hardy had probably intended Knollsea to be Swanage, which gave her a clue to the identities of the other places. Melchester, an indeterminate location in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, seemed to her to have become clearly Salisbury; but there was still a lot it was impossible to work out.

Wessex also had an important role to play in the central theme of the novel. In *Far From the Madding Crowd* there had been, despite the general harmoniousness between farmer and workforce, hints of the class hostilities that underlie Hardy's earliest thinking about human relations in fiction, and which have been foregrounded in much modern writing about him. Andrew Randle the stammering farmhand had been turned away from his last place because he said 'his soul was his own, and other iniquities, to the squire'. (X) There is a bitterness too that lies behind Mark Clark's measure of certainty that having a woman to run their farm will result in disaster: 'All will be ruined and ourselves too, or there's no meat in gentlemen's houses!' (XV) This aspect of the relations between the classes was restrained below the surface of narratives that had proved acceptable to the majority of novel readers, but he chose to let it flow in *The Hand of Ethelberta*. The novel illuminates what Lucy later called 'Mr Hardy's experience of not being a gentleman', and one of the ways it does this is by contrasting life in London society with life in Wessex, as in:

'Oh, you are here, Picotee? I am glad to see you,' said the mistress of the house, quietly.

This was altogether to Picotee's surprise, for she had expected a round rating at least, in her freshness hardly being aware that this reserve of feeling was an acquired habit of Ethelberta's, and that civility stood in town for as much vexation as a tantrum represented in Wessex. (XX)

Or when one time Christopher leaves the London house he kisses Ethelberta on the cheek, she demands that he kiss Picotee too:

'She is my sister, and I am yours.'

It seemed all right and natural to their respective moods and the tone of the moment that free old Wessex manners should prevail, and Christopher stooped and dropped upon Picotee's cheek likewise such a farewell kiss as he had imprinted on Ethelberta's. (XXVI)

The Hand of Ethelberta is nowadays often thought of as a wholly managed self-conscious satire on the manners and practices of Society, that reveals more fully than any other novel the class-antagonism that drives all of Hardy's writing; there is much to support such a view, and if I had to choose one detail that effectively uses an element of Wessex life to attack a member of Society, it would be the description of the old Lord Mountclere courting Ethelberta, 'the viscount busying himself round and round her person like the head scraper at a pig-killing' (XXXIII) – a deliberately crude and cruel description, and one that gains extra resonance for Hardy's modern readers by association with the pig-killing episode in *Jude the Obscure*. But there are also (as usual) details that leave the reader in uncertainty about Hardy's position. Ethelberta's brother Sol, as we might expect, attacks her marriage to Mountclere because she has betrayed her class:

'Berta, you have worked to false lines. A creeping up among the useless lumber of our nation that'll be the first to burn if there comes a flare. I never see such a deserter of your own lot as you be! But you were always like it, Berta, and I'm ashamed of ye. More than that, a good woman never marries twice.' (XLVIII)

The deeply conventional morality of the last sentence suggests that Hardy understands that, though London Society is flawed, the Wessex labourer too has prejudices that might be held to undermine any simple argument about class in the novel.¹⁹

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