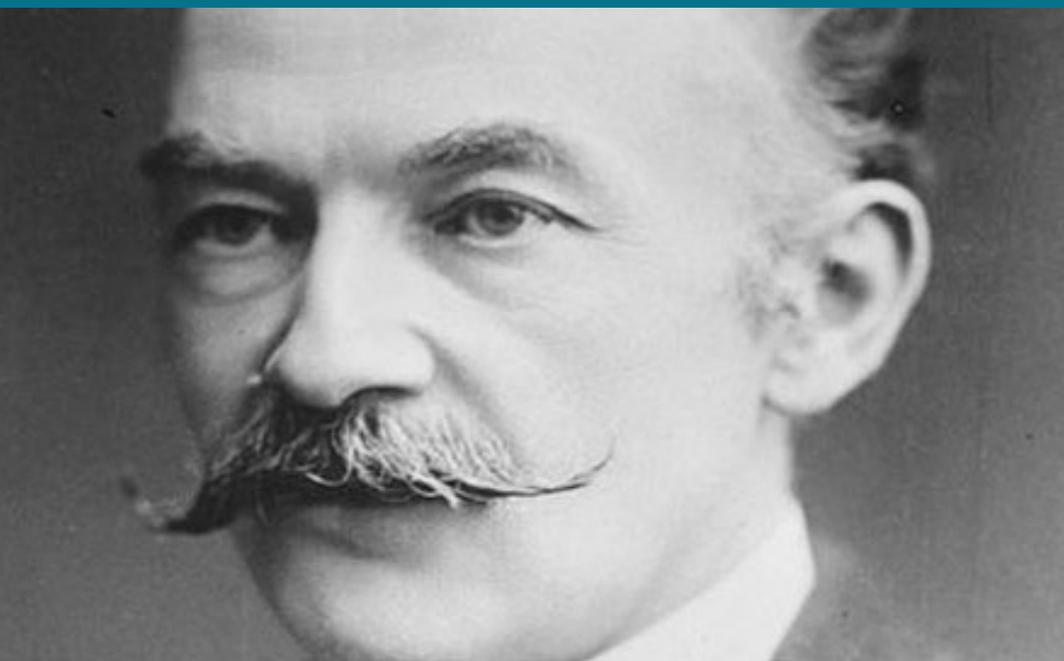


# Reading Thomas Hardy

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## Selected Poems



Neil Wenborn

LITERATURE INSIGHTS  
GENERAL EDITOR : C W R D MOSELEY

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Thomas Hardy:  
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## The Author

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Neil Wenborn graduated in English from Magdalene College, Cambridge, and worked at the Bodleian Library in Oxford before pursuing a career in publishing, becoming Editorial Director of one of the UK's leading independent publishers. Since 1989 he has been a freelance writer and publishing consultant and has published widely both in Britain and in the United States. His works include biographies of Haydn, Stravinsky and Dvořák. He is co-editor of the highly respected *History Today Companion to British History* (Collins & Brown) and *A Dictionary of Jewish–Christian Relations* (Cambridge University Press), as well as of the poetry anthology *Contourlines: New Responses to Landscape in Word and Image* (Salt Publishing). A collection of his poetry, *Firedoors*, is published by Rockingham Press. Neil Wenborn is the author of *Jane Austen: Emma* in the Literature Insights series.

## Abbreviations

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Bailey: J. O. Bailey, *The Poetry of Thomas Hardy: A Handbook and Commentary* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 1970)

Casebook: James Gibson & Trevor Johnson, eds, *Thomas Hardy: Poems: A Casebook* (London & Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1979)

Critical Heritage: R. G. Cox, ed., *Thomas Hardy: The Critical Heritage* (London & New York: Routledge, 1979)

HLLVP: Dennis Taylor, *Hardy's Literary Language and Victorian Philology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993)

HMVP: Dennis Taylor, *Hardy's Metres and Victorian Prosody* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988)

L: Thomas Hardy, *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy* (7 vols), ed. Richard Little Purdy & Michael Millgate (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978–88)

LLE: Thomas Hardy, *Late Lyrics and Earlier*

LW: Thomas Hardy, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Michael Millgate (London & Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984)

ORCH: *Oxford Reader's Companion to Hardy*, ed. Norman Page (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000)

PPP: Thomas Hardy, *Poems of the Past and the Present*

All references to the poems are to James Gibson's edition of *The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy* (London & Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1976). The poem numbering is identical in James Gibson's *The Variorum Edition of The Complete Poems of Thomas Hardy* (London & Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1979).

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## Introduction

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Thomas Hardy's poetry is unique in English literature as the work of an indisputably major novelist who is also an indisputably major poet. Running to almost a thousand poems, not including the epic verse drama *The Dynasts*, it is one of the most distinctive bodies of verse in the canon. It has also been one of the most controversial. Since its first appearance in the closing years of the nineteenth century, critics and readers alike have stumbled over its awkwardnesses or been seduced by its idiosyncratic music, have denigrated it as technically inept or celebrated its elaborate craftsmanship. It has been read as the work of a proto-modernist and as an archetype of the Victorian intellectual odyssey; as the enabling condition for contemporary poetry and as responsible for a poverty of ambition in twentieth-century British verse. At once direct and elusive, traditional and modern, the acme of artifice and a conduit of intense emotion, it remains a critical enigma. The closer one looks at it, the more it seems to escape classification, the more its contradictions multiply.

Hardy was a poet before he was a novelist and he saw poetry as his principal vocation, yet he began to publish his verse only when his novel-writing years were over, and it was almost universally regarded at the time, as it has often been popularly regarded since, as an appendix to his prose. Hardy's prodigious poetic output between his middle fifties and his death at the age of eighty-seven constitutes perhaps the most remarkable late flowering in the history of English poetry. But he had already been writing verse for more than thirty years by the time he first placed it before the public, and the eight collections he produced in the following thirty years typically intersperse newly written poems with others of earlier, sometimes much earlier, origin (see 2.1 and 2.2 below). Hardy's poetry thus straddles a period of rapidly changing sensibilities: an oeuvre with its roots in the age of Swinburne, Arnold and Meredith, it found its readership in the age of Yeats, Eliot and Pound.

Hardy is both a great traditionalist and a great innovator. Perhaps no other English poet has drawn so comprehensively on the metrical traditions of his predecessors to produce a corpus so formally various and inventive. His complete poems deploy nearly 800 different metrical forms, more than 600 of which are stanzaic forms of his own devising.<sup>1</sup> Traditional English forms, including several derived from hymns and traditional ballads, jostle with classical metres, French romance forms and exotic imports like the Persian ghazal. At the same time, Hardy is capable of handling his metrical resources with a freedom so unsettling to the expectations they generate that critics have often regarded it as carelessness. On a first reading, lines can seem overcrowded or accents wrenched out of true, and it is not uncommon for a poem's metre to become clear only after we have read it all the way through (and not always then: one of his greatest poems, *After a Journey* [289], has famously resisted numerous attempts to scan it). Deeply suspicious of what he called 'the jewelled line', Hardy was committed to an aesthetic of disruption, of the 'intentionally rough-hewn'; D. H. Lawrence, indeed, wrote of him as a poet who had gone some way towards answering Synge's call for 'the brutalising of English verse'.<sup>2</sup> It is one of the paradoxes of his poetry that Hardy's technical sophistication thus co-exists with a kind of customized awkwardness, a homemade quality which could remind F. R. Leavis of the Poet's Corner in a provincial newspaper.

The verbal texture of the poetry, too, is unlike anything else in the canon. Hardy had a collector's passion for words. As a young poet learning his craft in the 1860s, he compiled extensive word-lists from his reading of other poets, and recent scholarship has revealed the depth of his connection with contemporary developments in philology. His poems draw their vocabulary from an unprecedentedly wide range of sources. Archaisms sit alongside coinages and technical terms, neologisms next to rarities, poeticisms, and local and dialect words. As Hardy's friend, the critic William Archer, acutely

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1 See Dennis Taylor's entry on 'Metrics' in *ORCH*, 273.

2 Letter to Edmund Gosse, 4 February 1919, quoted in *Casebook*, 34; *L*, vi, 159; *The English Review*, Nov. 1911, quoted in Donald Davie, *Thomas Hardy and British Poetry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), 139.

noted of *Wessex Poems* (in terms which Hardy, tellingly, took as a compliment):

There are times when Mr Hardy seems to lose all sense of local and historical perspective in language, seeing all the words in the dictionary on one plane, so to speak, and regarding them all as equally available and appropriate for any and every literary purpose. (*ORCH*, 222–3)

The results of this linguistic eclecticism seldom approach synthesis. Rather there is a sense of juxtaposition, almost of mosaic, about the surfaces of Hardy's verse. We are continually tripping over unevennesses of diction, being brought up short by usages the purpose and placement of which we cannot avoid questioning. Hardy's is a profoundly *uninevitable* language: we are always aware that he is making choices between different forms of expression and are therefore subliminally conscious of other choices he might have made and didn't. As readers, we are thus brought untypically close to the process of composition—part of the reason perhaps why Hardy's revision practice has been an unusually developed focus of critical attention (see 2.1 below).

It is another paradox of Hardy's poetry that this conspicuousness of medium goes hand-in-hand with a remarkable directness of expression. In 1920, comparing himself with the younger generation of poets, Hardy declared that he was 'very anxious not to be obscure', and several critics have noted how small a part ambiguity plays in his verse.<sup>1</sup> Yet Hardy's directness can affect us in ways we are apt to associate with more signalled layerings of meaning than he chooses to offer. At its most powerful, his poetry seems to draw its extraordinary resonance from sources closer to the traditional music of the ballad and the folksong than to the strategies of the Western literary mainstream. Ezra Pound may overstate his case in saying that '[w]hen a writer's matter is stated with [...] such clarity there is no

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1 Vere H. Collins, *Talks with Thomas Hardy at Max Gate* (London: Duckworth, 1928), 21. What Jean R. Brooks says of 'Life and Death at Sunrise' (698) could be said of many of the poems: 'It is difficult for the most ardent student of ambiguity to make the poem carry a meaning other than the one intended by the poet' (*Thomas Hardy: The Poetic Structure* [London: Elek, 1971], 50).

place left for the explaining critic',<sup>1</sup> but it is surely true that the *nature* of Hardy's clarity has yet to be explained in terms appropriate to the complexity of effect we experience in reading him.

Dylan Thomas used to introduce his public readings of Hardy by declaring: 'I like *all* his poems: I'm *completely unselective* about him.'<sup>2</sup> Characteristically extravagant as it is, Thomas' claim points to one of the most distinctive, and least capturable, aspects of Hardy's output. For all their kaleidoscopic formal and generic variety, his collected poems have a peculiar unity. Not only is Hardy's voice one of the most instantly recognizable of any English poet, its stylistic components are also unmistakably the same across poems of widely differing ambition—whether the greatest love-elegies he wrote to the memory of his first wife, Emma, or the slenderest anecdotes he versified from newspaper reports, family traditions and local gossip. His tonal and thematic range, too, is famously concentrated, a concentration for which the charge of pessimism so often levelled at him in his lifetime and since can be read as a convenient if ultimately misleading shorthand. In 'The Minute before Meeting' (191), for example, the speaker, on the verge of seeing his beloved again after 'slow blank months' of absence, is keenly conscious 'that what is now about to be / Will all *have been* in O, so short a space'. It is a highly characteristic moment. As F. L. Lucas wrote in 1940, Hardy 'saw things as instinctively in three tenses as in three dimensions' (*Casebook*, 132). The corollary of this heightened consciousness of the passage of time, however, is a heightened awareness of the preciousness of the moment, an ability (in a phrase Hardy copied into his notebook in 1923) to 'extract a magic from the familiar' which caused one early reviewer of the poems to remark that '[n]othing is too trivial or too commonplace for their art'.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it is perhaps the greatest paradox of Hardy's poetry that it embodies an affirmation of the quotidian realities of life within a sustained vision of transience unlike anything else in English literature.

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1 Quoted in Harold Orel, ed., *Critical Essays on Thomas Hardy's Poetry* (New York & Oxford: Maxwell Macmillan, 1995), 52–3.

2 *Dylan Thomas: The Caedmon Collection*, Harper Audio, CD 5, track 16.

3 Anonymous review in *The Nation*, 1915, quoted in *Casebook*, 69–70.

Both stylistically and thematically, then, all Hardy's poems, whatever their genre or stature, are recognizably hewn from the same material, as continuous with each other as the wood of the woman's sewing-box and her lover's coffin in 'The Workbox' (330), and often to comparably unsettling effect. Not only does repeated reading tend to reduce the differential between them; it also tends to interanimate them, almost always to the benefit of the slighter pieces. As one critic has observed:

To see the poems as a whole is quite a different experience from admiring some of the best-known anthology pieces and being surprised at the slightness, oddness or apparent triviality of their neighbours. All the poems illuminate each other, casting reciprocal light backwards and forwards, so that quite small pieces attain a glow which might otherwise be imperceptible.<sup>1</sup>

All this makes Hardy notoriously difficult to select. More fundamentally than with most poets of his stature, any attempt to carve out a canon from the complete works, or even to produce a representative selection, seems like an act of distortion against the whole. It is a difficulty compounded by the fact that, beyond that hard core of 'anthology pieces', critical consensus remains remarkably elusive as to which are the indispensable poems. Even writers who approach Hardy's work from similar critical standpoints can sometimes reach very different conclusions about individual poems. This variety of response is reflected in the many selections which have appeared since Hardy's own *Chosen Poems* (see 2.2 below). Take, for example, two well-known anthologies in which Hardy has a significant presence. Philip Larkin's *Oxford Book of Twentieth-Century English Verse* includes twenty-seven Hardy poems, the largest selection from any individual poet, while Seamus Heaney's and Ted Hughes' *The Rattle Bag* includes sixteen, making Hardy the best represented poet after Anon. and William Blake. Strikingly, however, only two poems appear in both.

How, then, to approach the sheer bulk of Hardy's collected

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1 T. R. M. Creighton, quoted in *Casebook*, 242.

poems? Taking their cue from Hardy himself, who made some attempt to group his poems within collections, critics have often examined them by theme or genre. Like Hardy's own categories, however, such classifications are highly porous and are apt to unravel into miscellaneity. They also tend to submerge chronology, insofar as it can be deduced from the publication history (see 2.2), as well as the formal and thematic continuities between seemingly divergent genres which are one of the hallmarks of Hardy's poetic method.<sup>1</sup> The poems selected for close reading in Section 3 below are therefore considered not by category but in order of their publication in the individual collections Hardy compiled during his lifetime. They have been chosen to illuminate some of Hardy's most salient characteristics as a poet. Needless to say, however, they represent only the smallest selection of a selection from the total number of poems he committed to print, and there remains no substitute for immersion in the complete works. 'His poems are members of one another', wrote one holistically minded reviewer in 1917; 'and the reader must know them all before he can properly appreciate any one' (*HMVP*, 124). Dylan Thomas, typically, was more direct. 'The best thing', he would proclaim before launching into the Hardy poems which formed the centrepiece of his platform performances, 'is to read *the whole damn lot*.'<sup>2</sup>

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1 In June 1912 Hardy noted a sentence from the *Edinburgh Review* 'which I might have written myself. "The division [of poems] into separate groups [ballad, lyrical, narrative, &c.] is frequently a question of the preponderance, not of the exclusive possession, of certain aesthetic elements"' (*LW*, 386; Hardy's brackets).

2 *Dylan Thomas: The Caedmon Collection*, Harper Audio, CD 5, track 16.

# 1. Hardy in his Time

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## 1.1 Life and Work

‘Mr Hardy’s feeling for a long time was that he would not care to have his life written at all.’ So begins, blandly enough, the ‘Prefatory Note’ to one of the more extraordinary exercises in the history of biography, the two-volume life of Hardy published after his death under the name of his second wife Florence. In fact, the book which appeared as *The Early Years of Thomas Hardy* (1928) and *The Later Years of Thomas Hardy* (1930)—now often referred to simply as the *Life*—is almost entirely the work of Thomas Hardy himself.<sup>1</sup> An attempt by an intensely private man to control the shape of future accounts of his life, the book has indeed exerted a powerful influence over Hardy biography. Even such major lives as those by Robert Gittings, Michael Millgate and Claire Tomalin necessarily stand in its shadow, not least in that Hardy ensured the destruction of much of the first-hand material on which it was based. While a less mediated portrait can arguably be found in the seven volumes of letters edited by Richard Purdy and Michael Millgate, Hardy’s autobiography-by-proxy has succeeded in preserving his privacy to a degree quite remarkable for a literary figure of his time and public profile.

Thomas Hardy was born on 2 June 1840 in the Dorset hamlet of Higher Bockhampton, the first of four children of Thomas Hardy, a stonemason and builder, and his wife Jemima, a one-time cook who was pregnant with him at the time of her marriage. The cottage at Higher Bockhampton, now owned by the National Trust, is commemorated in Hardy’s earliest surviving poem, ‘Domicilium’ (1), and was

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1 The precise extent of Florence’s authorial intervention in the project after Hardy’s death has been much debated. *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, edited by Michael Millgate, seeks to reconstruct the text of the *Life* as it appeared after Hardy’s final revisions, and all references are to this volume.

the focus of a characterful extended family of Hardy relations with their origins in the rural artisanate or labouring classes. Music was an important element in the life of the household—Hardy’s father was a member of the church band fictionalized as the ‘Mellstock Quire’ in *Under the Greenwood Tree* and several poems—and it would remain one of Hardy’s great loves; he was himself an able violinist and a keen dancer into old age. This musical heritage, which included folksongs, hymns and psalm tunes, has yet to be fully studied, but it clearly stands behind many of the poems, as does the body of folk tales and traditions handed on to Hardy especially by his paternal grandmother, whose reservoir of local knowledge he memorialized in ‘One We Knew’ (227).<sup>1</sup>

Hardy was formally educated from the ages of eight to sixteen, first at the new National School in Lower Bockhampton, the subject of the poem ‘He Revisits His First School’ (462), and from 1850 at two schools in Dorchester, the Casterbridge of his novels and poems. This period of schooling—an extensive one for a boy of Hardy’s social standing—was the prelude to a lifelong project of self-education, the rigour and range of which can be traced through the notebooks that survived the holocaust of papers after his death. A crucial mentor in this process was his friend Horace Moule, the brilliant but unstable son of the vicarage in Fordington near Dorchester, whose suicide in 1873 has been seen as a decisive moment in the formation of Hardy’s outlook.

Hardy’s creative life falls into three distinct periods. For sixteen years from 1856, when he was apprenticed to the Dorchester architect John Hicks, he pursued a steady but unspectacular career in architecture, moving to London in 1862, where he worked for five years for the firm of Arthur Blomfield. The relationship between Hardy’s architectural training and the character of his writing has been much canvassed, not least by Hardy himself in the *Life* (see 2.1 below). Certainly, architecture provided a subject or background for poems

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1 Poems such as ‘Reminiscences of a Dancing Man’ (165), ‘Great Things’ (414) and ‘An Ancient to Ancients’ (660) attest to Hardy’s lifelong love of dance and the dance-tunes of his youth; others may well have been written to existing tunes as, for example, ‘Timing Her’ (373) and ‘O I Won’t Lead a Homely Life’ (607) avowedly were.