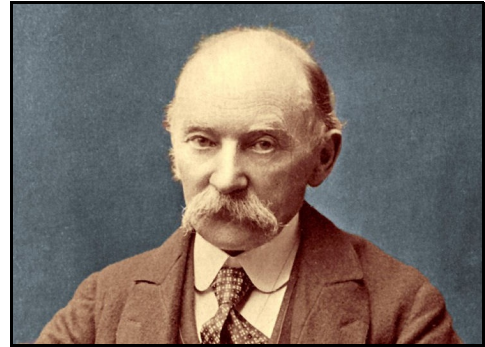


THOMAS HARDY

(2 June 1840–11 January 1928)

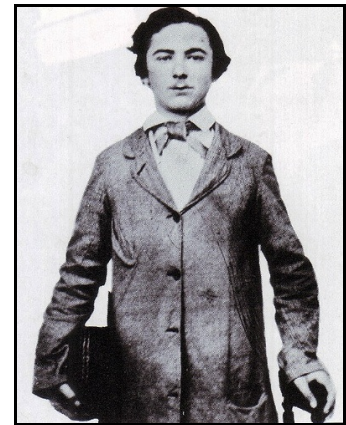
Chris Snodgrass © 2015

Thomas Hardy wrote poetry throughout his life and regarded himself primarily as a poet, but he gained fame initially with his novels. Although his poetry also found much acclaim, he published 14 novels and 3 collections of short stories over 25 years before publishing any of his poetry. Most of his fictional works are set in the semi-fictional region of Wessex (based on the medieval Anglo-Saxon kingdom) comprising the counties of Dorset, Wiltshire, Somerset, Devon, Hampshire and much of Berkshire, in southwest and south central England. They explore tragic characters struggling against their passions and social circumstances in a world suggested to be ruled by Fate or Chance, characters who sometimes find temporary salvation in the age-old rhythms of rural life and who can achieve dignity through endurance, and heroism through simple strength of character.



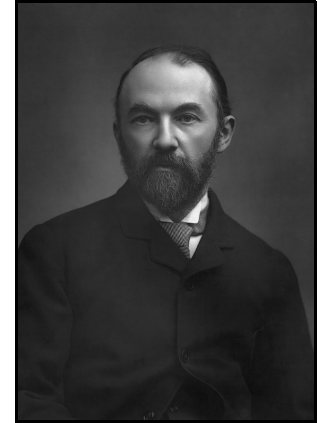
Thomas Hardy 1911

Thomas Hardy was born in Higher Bockhampton (Upper Bockhampton in his day), a hamlet in the parish of Stinsford to the east of Dorchester, where his father Thomas (1811–1892) worked as a stonemason and local builder. His mother Jemima (née Hand; 1813–1904) was well-read, educating Thomas until he went at age 8 to his first school at Bockhampton, where he learned Latin. Lacking the means for a university education, Hardy's formal education ended at the age of 16, when he became apprenticed to James Hicks, a local architect, in Dorchester. He moved to London in 1862, where he enrolled as a student at King's College London and won prizes from the Royal Institute of British Architects and the Architectural Association. Acutely conscious of class divisions and his social inferiority, he never felt at home in London but became interested in the social-reform works of John Stuart Mill and Auguste Comte. Five years later, concerned about his health, he returned to Dorset, settling at Weymouth, and dedicated himself to writing.



Thomas Hardy Age 19

In 1870, while on an architectural mission to restore the parish church of St Juliot in Cornwall, Hardy met and fell in love with Emma Lavinia Gifford, whom he married in 1874. Subsequently the Hardys moved from London to Yeovil, and then to Sturminster Newton, where he wrote *The Return of the Native* (1878), one of his better but still underrated novels. In 1885, they moved for the last time, to Max Gate, a house outside Dorchester designed by Hardy and built by his brother. His greatest masterpiece *Jude the Obscure* (1895) met with strong negative response from the Victorian public because of its controversial treatment of sex, religion and marriage. Some booksellers sold the novel in brown paper bags, and the Bishop of Wakefield is reputed to have ostentatiously burned his copy (In his postscript of 1912, Hardy humorously referred to this incident: “After these [hostile] verdicts from the press its next misfortune was to be burnt by a bishop—probably in his despair at not being able to burn me.”)



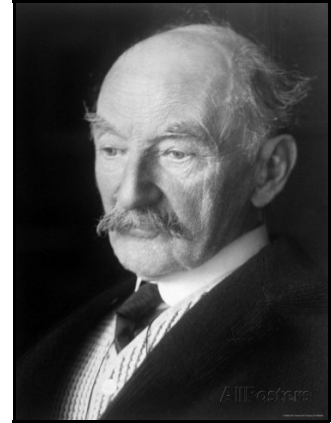
Thomas Hardy 1891

In 1898 Hardy published his first volume of poetry, *Wessex Poems*, a collection of poems written over the previous 30 years, and in the 20th century Hardy published only poetry. He wrote in a great variety of poetic forms including lyrics, ballads, satire, dramatic monologues, and dialogue, as well as a three-volume epic closet drama *The Dynasts* (1904–1908), and though in some ways a very traditional poet, because he was influenced by folk songs and ballads, he was never conventional and persistently experimented often with invented stanza forms and meters, making use of “rough-hewn rhythms and colloquial diction.” Hardy wrote a number of significant war poems that relate to both the Boer Wars and World War I, often using the viewpoint of ordinary soldiers and their colloquial speech. His work had a profound influence on other war poets such as Rupert Brooke and Siegfried Sassoon.

Hardy and wife Emma had become estranged in the 1890s, exacerbated by her view that *Jude the Obscure*'s harshness about marriage was autobiographical, but Emma's death in 1912 had a traumatic effect on him. After her death, Hardy made a trip to Cornwall to revisit places linked with their courtship. His *Poems* (1912–13), said by biographer Claire Tomalin to contain “the finest and strangest celebrations of the dead in English poetry,” reflects upon her death and their estrangement. Many of Hardy's poems deal with themes of disappointment in love and life, the best of them with carefully controlled elegiac feeling and often eloquent irony. A number of notable English composers, including Benjamin Britten, have set Hardy poems to

music.

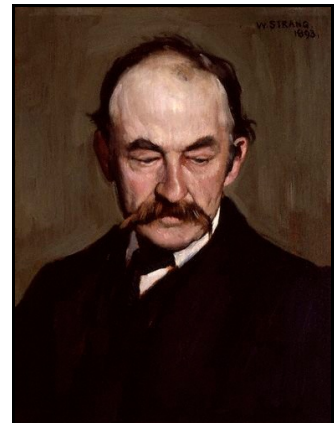
In 1914 Hardy married his secretary Florence Emily Dugdale, who was 39 years his junior, though still remaining preoccupied with his first wife's death. In 1910 he was awarded the Order of Merit and was also for the first time nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature; he was nominated for the prize again in 1921. Hardy became ill with pleurisy in December 1927 and died at Max Gate just after 9 pm on 11 January 1928, having dictated his final poem to his wife on his deathbed. His funeral was on 16 January at Westminster Abbey and, over the objections of his family, eventually interred in the Abbey's famous Poets' Corner. A compromise was reached whereby his heart was buried at Stinsford with Emma.



Thomas Hardy 1920s

In both his fiction and his poetry Hardy frequently conceives of, and writes about, supernatural forces (including some fascination with ghosts and spirits), particularly those that control the universe through indifference or caprice rather than any firm will. The irony and struggles of life, together with his curious mind, led Hardy to question the traditional Christian view of God. Even so, he retained a strong emotional attachment to the Christian liturgy and church rituals, particularly as manifested in rural communities that had been such a formative influence in his early years, and Biblical references can be found woven throughout many of Hardy's novels. Hardy himself denied that he was a pessimist, calling himself a "meliorist," i. e., one who believes that the world may be better by human effort. But there is little sign of "meliorism" in either his most important novels or his lyric poetry. Still, his best poems go beyond a mood of perverse or disastrous circumstance to present with quiet elegiac gravity some aspect of human sorrow or loss or frustration or regret, always projected through a particular, fully realized situation.

Hardy's fiction was admired by many 20th-century writers, including D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf, and Somerset Maugham. Moreover, although Hardy's poems were initially not as well received as his novels had been, he is now recognized as one of the greatest 20th-century poets, and his verse has had a profound influence on later writers, including Robert Frost, W. H. Auden, Dylan Thomas, and most notably Philip Larkin. In Larkin's edition of the *Oxford*



Hardy, Wm Strang Painting

Book of Twentieth Century English Verse (1973) he included 27 poems by Hardy and far fewer by such icons as T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats. Moreover, in the area of popular culture, Hardy has been a significant influence on Nigel Blackwell, frontman of the post-punk British rock band Half Man Half Biscuit, who has often incorporated phrases by or about Hardy into his song lyrics.