

THOMAS HARDY

1840 – 1928



Thomas Hardy was born on 2nd June 1840 in a thatched cottage in Higher Brockhamton, Dorset, and grew up in this isolated cottage on the edge of open heathland. He was the eldest of four children and was often ill as a child but this early experience of rural life is fundamental to his later writing. He was educated at home by his mother, Jemima, later going to Mr Last's Academy for young Gentlemen at the age of eight. His family lacked the means to send him to university and so his formal education ended at sixteen. He trained as an architect in Dorchester before moving to London in 1862 and enrolled as a student at King's College where he won prizes for his architectural work.

Hardy never felt at home in London as he was very aware of class divisions and his social inferiority. So, five years later, in 1867 he returned to Dorset and decided to dedicate himself to writing. However he continued with some architectural work and on one of these missions he met and fell in love with Emma Gifford. In 1884 they were married and in 1885 they moved into Max Gate, just outside Dorchester into a house designed by Hardy and built by his brother. Here he wrote "The Mayor of Casterbridge" and "Tess of the Durbervilles." He and his wife later became estranged but her sudden death had a traumatic effect on Hardy and he wrote many poems reflecting upon it. In 1914 he married his secretary, Florence Emily Dugdale who was 39 years his junior.

He was awarded the Order of Merit in 1910 and was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature. His first love was writing poetry, particularly relating to nature but these poems were not published at the time so he reluctantly turned to prose. It was "Far from the Madding Crowd" that made him famous – 'madding' in this case means "frenzied." His poems were about war relating to both the Boer War and First World War and he had a profound influence on what we now call 'War Poets' – Rupert Brooke and Siegfried Sassoon.

But he continued to write many more novels, sometimes they were serialised in various magazines. The term 'cliffhanger' is considered to have originated with the serialisation of one of these novels where one of his characters, a Mr Henry Knight, was left literally hanging off a cliff! He was considered a Victorian realist and many of his novels were published anonymously and some booksellers sold these in brown paper bags!!

"Far from the Madding Crowd" is when he first introduced the idea of calling the region in the South West of England, "Wessex" and this is where most of his novels are set. This book made Hardy successful enough to pursue a literary career and over the next twenty five years he produced ten more novels. Many of these received hostile reviews because they dealt with issues of sex, rape, illegitimacy, rejection, little regard for the institution of marriage and for his sympathetic portrayal of "a fallen woman."

His first 'published' novel was "Under the Greenwood Tree." Most of his novels explored tragic characters struggling against their passions and social circumstances and they often seem to be held in fate's overwhelming grip – "What if?" e.g. "Had Bathsheba not sent the valentine, had Fanny not missed her wedding, for example, the story would have taken on entirely different path," (from "Far from the Madding Crowd"). Even many of his poems deal with themes of disappointment in love and life? He felt "regret and remorse" on the death of his first wife from whom he was estranged for twenty years.

However his works had a profound influence on later writers – Robert Frost, W.H. Auden, Dylan Thomas and most notably Philip Larkin. In spite of early criticism he was one of the few writers whose works were accepted as classics in his own life-time and he became quite a celebrity by the 1900's. He gave up writing novels in 1896 due to the harsh criticism he received after writing "Jude the Obscure" in 1895, but he continued to write poems – his first love.

One of his poems expressing his love of nature -

WEATHERS

This is the weather the cuckoo likes,
And so do I:
When showers betumble the chestnut spikes,
And nestlings fly;
And the little brown nightingale bills his best,
And they sit outside at "The Travellers' Rest,"
And maids come forth sprig-muslin drest,
And citizens dream of the south and west,
And so do I.

This is the weather the shepherd shuns
And so do I:
When beeches drip in browns and duns,
And thresh and ply;
And hill-hid tides throb, throe on throe,
And meadows rivulets overflow,
And drops on gate-bars hang in a row,
And rooks in families homeward go,
And so do I.



Thomas Hardy's Birthplace

In December 1927 he became ill with pleurosy and died at Max Gate on 11th January 1928. His funeral was at Westminster Abbey. Hardy himself had wished to be buried with his first wife Emma, his family agreed, but his executer insisted he be placed in the Abbey's "Poet's Corner". A compromise was reached whereby his heart was buried at Stinsford with Emma and his ashes in Poet's Corner.