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REVIEW

Mark Ford. 2016. *Thomas Hardy: Half a Londoner*. Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

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Called by John Sutherland (1989, 277) "the greatest regional novelist of the nineteenth century," Thomas Hardy has always been associated with Wessex – an antique term he used in reference to south-western counties (particularly Dorset) where many of his novels and poems are set. Described by Hardy as "a partly real, partly dream-country" Wessex conjures up images of a bygone rural world and of evocative countryside landscapes. Hardy grew up in Dorset where his family had been living for generations and lived there for most of his life. In F.R. Leavis's oft-quoted words (1932, 61) "Hardy was a countryman, and his brooding mind stayed itself habitually upon the simple pieties, the quiet rhythms and the immemorial ritual of rustic life." However, as Mark Ford reminds us in his absorbing study – partly biography and partly literary criticism – Hardy considered himself "half a Londoner," as he put it in a letter to Edmund Gosse (2016, xiii). Ford points out that "the focus on Wessex in critical responses to Hardy's work has obscured the importance of London to his career and development" (xiv). Ford's illuminating book offers "the first comprehensive account of Hardy as a 'London man'" (xiv) and proves that Victorian London exerted a profound influence on Hardy's identity as well as on his fiction and poetry. The author of *Thomas Hardy: Half a Londoner* transforms the popular image of Hardy as a man of Wessex countryside by putting into focus the young man who left the country for London in the 1860s and who spent the next twenty years of his life trying to conquer the metropolis.

Ford presents a convincing argument that both Hardy's life and his literary oeuvre were shaped by a strong tension between the country and the city, which resulted in "a profound personal sense of self-division" (2016, xv). The self-division had taken a rather literal meaning as demonstrated by Ford in the Introduction entitled "In Death Divided" where he describes the controversy surrounding the disposal of Hardy's body after his death in 1928. Hardy wanted to be buried in the Stinsford Churchyard, next to the graves of his parents and his first wife, Emma; however, his literary executor Sydney Cockerell insisted that the famous writer should be buried in Westminster Abbey. In a rather macabre compromise, Hardy's heart was removed from his body and buried in Stinsford,

the body was cremated and the ashes were buried in the Abbey. Edmund Gosse described it as the “medieval butchery” of Hardy’s body, and – as Mark Ford puts it – this “butchery was the unsatisfactory compromise reached in a battle fought between the interests and convictions of London and Dorset” (2016, 6).

Drawing on Hardy’s (auto)biography *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy* and his letters, Ford paints a fascinating picture of Hardy’s life in London from years 1862 to 1867 when he lived in Westbourne Park Villas near Paddington and worked as an architect in Adelphi Terrace, off the Strand, to his frequent and extended visits in the capital in the following years, which did not stop even when Hardy settled permanently in Dorchester. He reveals Hardy’s feelings of ambivalence towards the metropolis. On the one hand, Hardy appreciated the city which provided him with countless opportunities for shaping his identity, allowed him to meet people from different social classes and offered a wide range of new experiences. On the other hand, he experienced “dismay at the ‘mechanical’ indifference, and poverty of the millions of Londoners in whose midst he anonymously moved” (2016, 92-93).

Mark Ford, who is Professor of English and American Literature at University College London, is also a distinguished poet, and perhaps that is why his close readings of Hardy’s poems turn out to be both sensitive and incisive. He pays particular attention to Hardy’s early poems written in London between 1865-1867, such as “Dream of the City Shopwoman,” “Coming Up Oxford Street: Evening” and he discusses the “division between the rural and the urban dramatized in poems such as ‘From Her in the Country’ and ‘The Ruined Maid’” (2016, 94). Moreover, he sheds a new light on Hardy’s poetry by tracing intertextual connections between Hardy’s works and those of John Donne, William Wordsworth, but also Seamus Heaney and the Australian poet Peter Porter.

Ford’s perceptive interpretations of Hardy’s novels bring into focus the influence of London on Hardy’s artistic imagination and explore the productive tension between the mutually dependent worlds of the city and the country. He draws our attention to the works outside Hardy’s canon, such as the rarely read *The Hand of Ethelberta* or *The Well-Beloved* because they are set half in London and half in Wessex; juxtaposing the rural and the urban, they exemplify such tensions in a particularly stimulating way. *The Hand of Ethelberta* dismissed by many as one of Hardy’s “slighter efforts” (Sutherland 1989, 273) emerges out of Ford’s insightful reading as an innovative exploration of the theme of performance and construction of the self in a modern urban environment. Ford provides compelling interpretations of the canonical novels as well, showing that even in *Far from the Madding Crowd* or *The Mayor of Casterbridge* considered by many to be prime examples of Hardy’s Wessex novels the interaction between the capital and the provinces shape the images and metaphors which construct Hardy’s fictional worlds.

Mark Ford’s excellent and thought-provoking study of Thomas Hardy reveals the author of *Jude the Obscure* as a complex writer whose works are to a greater or lesser degree shaped by the processes of imaginative re-workings of tensions between the rural and the urban. Ford allows his readers to dismantle the conventional persona of Hardy as the Wessex man, and to fully appreciate the depth and richness of his poems and novels.

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