A Distant Prospect of Wessex: Archaeology and the Past in the Life and Works of Thomas Hardy

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Illustrated with photographs taken by the author
Acknowledgements

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M.J.P.D.
My interest in archaeology dates back to an almost accidental first visit to Greece in 1982, a revelatory experience that I recounted in a magazine article. I returned from Athens determined not only to visit Greece as often as possible, but also to learn as much as I could about archaeology and visit as many sites in Britain as opportunity would allow. Being an English teacher of thirty-five years’ experience, I suppose I should claim that an interest in Thomas Hardy’s work dates back to studying The Mayor of Casterbridge at ‘A’ Level, but, in common with my students of that book, I admit that the opposite is the case; in fact it was only on being offered the opportunity to teach the book in 1994 that I returned to ‘give Hardy a second chance’. That same year I began Dr (later Professor) Peter Abbs’s two-year MA course at the University of Sussex, ‘Language, the Arts, and Education’, which allowed me in the second year to write, with boundless enthusiasm and inevitable superficiality, a dissertation on the influence of archaeology on the arts. To pursue this theme further, there could be no better literary subject than Thomas Hardy.

Both of these disparate topics – Hardy and archaeology – enjoy a wide and enduring following of long standing. Among the sciences (though, as many archaeologists would argue, their chosen discipline is one of the humanities), perhaps only archaeology has the inherent ability to arouse popular, imaginative interest to match the technical specialisation necessary for its professional pursuit. In 2010, for example, no fewer than 500 books were published – in English – on ancient Egypt alone. Thomas Hardy seems to attract a comparable level of interest, again, among general readership as well as in the realms of academe: all his works remain in print, and all eight of Hardy’s most celebrated novels, plus the early A Pair of Blue Eyes, and the complete poems, are available in one or more of the budget-priced series of paperbacks; one academic web-site, moreover, lists over seventy biographical and critical books about the author.

But why try to put these two topics together? In a television programme some years ago, I heard Lucinda Lambton give one of the best definitions of education that I have come across: the ability to make connections; and it is in a spirit of liberal, educational exploration that I bring together Thomas Hardy and archaeology.

When I re-read The Mayor of Casterbridge, with twelve years accumulated knowledge of archaeological sites, artefacts, and ideas behind me, the small collection of allusions in the book to actual Roman and prehistoric features in and around Dorchester automatically gained

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‘... some ruin bibber, randy for antique ...’ (Philip Larkin, ‘Church Going’) – and rather keen on a literary legend as well?
resonance, giving an extra, unanticipated, dimension to a visit to the town while I was part-way through my re-reading of the novel.

Perhaps this was a purely subjective coincidence of interests; yet, here was a famous author who grew up in one of the world’s most significant archaeological regions, whose eclectic interests included archaeology, whose life-span of almost eighty-eight years embraced the transformation of archaeology from the realm of the dilettante collector to that of a complex scientific discipline, and whose works made limited but frequent references to the subject. My interest was aroused. How much was Hardy concerned with archaeology per se amongst his plethora of interests? How much did he actually know about it? Did his Classical education, architectural training, and visit to Italy impinge on his perception of the mysterious traces of British prehistory and the Roman occupation with which he had grown up? How does reference to archaeology fit in with his overall narrative, aesthetic, and philosophical scheme? Such was the range of questions which arose in my mind once the conjunction of subjects had been made.

This study was never conceived as one of literary criticism only and the proportion of such material in particular chapters is dependent on the nature of the works dealt with. Two disparate topics, an author and a subject in which he was interested, will be unified in this examination. The two run along parallel lines, but the unifying factor in the dichotomy is always the man Thomas Hardy. My reading of Hardy is thus only one part of the discussion: often, I will digress, and Hardy will appear to be set aside, for part of the aim of the research is to discover, gather, and synthesise all the archaeological materials that are employed in his works. He is nonetheless implicitly present, since these are the very materials he selected to fashion into this significant and hitherto neglected aspect of his art. In this I am following, in a specialised way, in the footsteps of Herman Lea and his successors who identified and catalogued the settings in Hardy’s works. Much of this knowledge is not otherwise readily available to Hardy’s readers; conversely, archaeological texts usually make only the most fleeting reference – if any – to the appearance of archaeological sites and artefacts in fiction. The evident imbalance in the Bibliography between books on Hardy and related topics and those about archaeology is more apparent than real: most of those on the latter have provided only brief references.

In examining Hardy’s novels, I have referred to the Penguin Classics edition as being reliable and readily available to both scholars and general readers. The editors are listed in the Bibliography along with details of the texts of the short stories and poems.

The presentation of footnotes and the Bibliography is in accordance with the MLA Handbook throughout, with the exception that I have preferred to include initial ‘p.’ or ‘pp.’ for page numbers as being clearer in meaning, and book titles are italicised rather than underlined. To prevent confusion, in poems I have used line number(s) (l./ll.) for short poems or referred to stanzas (st.) or couplets (coup.) in longer works.

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