



December 1959

## An Old Architect's Last Draft

Philo Calhoun

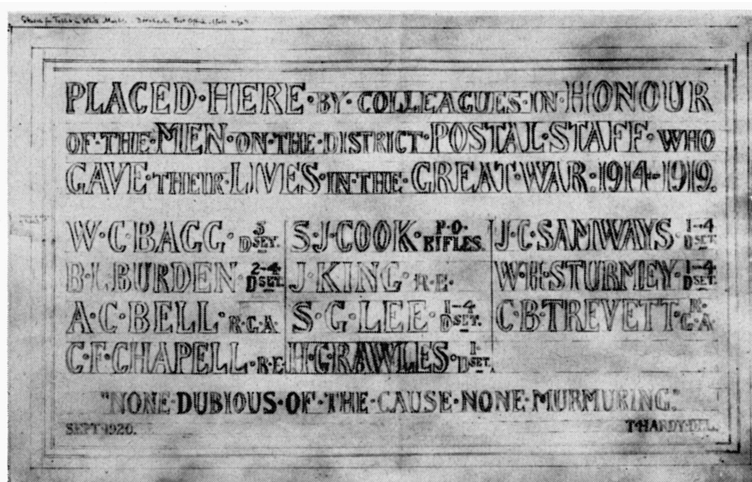
Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

---

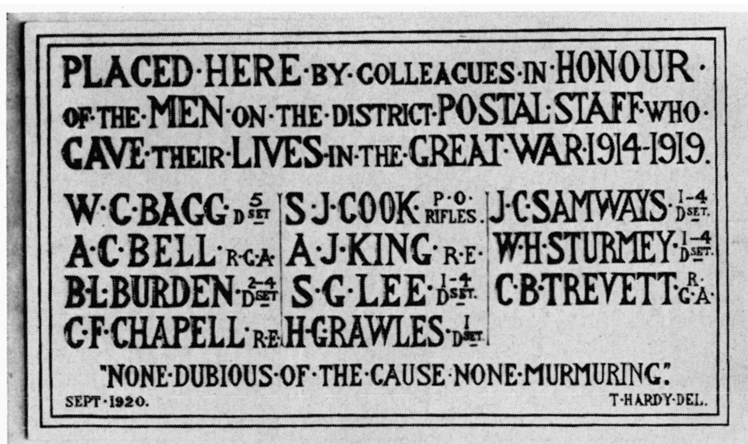
### Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 5, no.4, December 1959, p.60-66

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.



ORIGINAL SKETCH RETAINED BY HARDY  
(Courtesy of Dorset County Museum)



FINISHED TABLET IN DORCHESTER POSTOFFICE  
(Courtesy of Head Postmaster, Dorchester)

# Colby Library Quarterly

---

Series V

December 1959

No. 4

---

## AN OLD ARCHITECT'S LAST DRAFT

By PHILO CALHOUN

As far as I know, there is only one line of all the verse which Thomas Hardy wrote in his eighty-seven years which has been carved in stone. The story seems never to have been told before, at least not in *Hardiana* readily available.

On October 9, 1899, Paul Kruger, Boer leader of the Transvaal, delivered an ultimatum to the British, and three days later hostilities commenced. Troops were hastily equipped and transports began to leave within a matter of days after England realized that her forces in South Africa were alarmingly weak. Southampton Docks was the busiest spot in England during the week of October 15th. One gray afternoon sometime during that week a spare little man in untidy tweeds was leaning on his bicycle watching the crowd, conscious of the color and vigor of the military bands ("yellow as autumn leaves, alive as spring"), more acutely aware of tears coursing down faces which tried to smile. He had no kin or friend embarking that day; Southampton Docks was just one of many objectives in one of many days of cycling. Nevertheless, his sensitive nature was absorbing not only all the heart-aches of parting, but all the inexorable, senseless tragedies which were in store for many of those who stood on the docks with him, peering at the great ships until they became ghosts in the autumn haze. The man was Thomas Hardy.

In the two and a half weary years that followed, death took indeed a heavy toll. But, in compensation, the "President of the Immortals" seems to have provided that even the mire of such a war may sometimes nourish a flowering in the thoughts and words of men—a flowering of such majesty or poignant beauty as to balance a good deal of the ugliness and pain. Thus the American Civil War brought about the elegies of Walt Whitman, and the first World War the magnificent sonnets of Ru-

## 62 Colby Library Quarterly

pert Brooke. The South African campaign engendered the "War Poems" of Thomas Hardy, which include some of his finest verse.

The afternoon on Southampton Docks was responsible for at least three of the eleven pieces so entitled in *Poems of the Past and the Present* (London, 1902 [1901]), including the first of the series, a sonnet originally published in the *Daily Chronicle* for October 25, 1899, under the title "The Departure." In its later appearance in book form the title is altered to "Embarcation." It is the twelfth line of this poem which concludes the text of the white marble tablet in the Post Office at Dorchester commemorating the eleven men of the district postal staff who lost their lives in the first World War:

*None dubious of the cause, none murmuring.*

Hardy wrote the text for the tablet, drew the design, and supplied complete measurements and specifications. The "T. Hardy del." [*delineavit*] in the lower right corner is amply convincing, the lettering is in the familiar style of several other tablets designed by an architect who never lost his artistry, and contemporary records establish beyond doubt that both the text and design were his. A preliminary sketch was found in the Max Gate material and is now in the Dorset County Museum. (It is reproduced here through the courtesy of the Trustees of that institution.) The final design, drawn on white parchment to full size (2' x 1' 3") I acquired in Dorchester in the summer of 1958. The differences in the two drawings are inconsequential. In the Museum copy, guide lines have not been erased, and there is a colon after the words "Great War" which is replaced by a centered period in the later copy and in the finished tablet. The edge design is clearer and more carefully drawn in the final draft, and measurements and specifications are explicit.

I believe the tablet must have been the last serious work of hand lettering which Hardy undertook and, except for the frontispiece of *The Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall* (1923), the last of his drawings of any kind ever to be published or otherwise used. It is said to have been completed within a week after he accepted the commission—no small feat for a man in his eighty-first year.

## Colby Library Quarterly

63

There are two stories about how Hardy came to interest himself in this project. One of them appears in the account of the dedication exercises published in the *Dorset County Chronicle and Somerset Gazette* of November 18, 1920:

The idea of getting the personal interest of Mr. Thomas Hardy in the scheme was the inception of Mr. T. H. Rogers, who approached Mr. Hermann Lea, author of *The Wessex of Thomas Hardy*, and, through him an interview with the distinguished author was arranged. From the outset Mr. and Mrs. Hardy took the greatest possible interest in the projected memorial, and Mr. Hardy not only readily consented to supply suitable words for the inscription, but thought he might be able to spare the time to sketch out a design. Needless to say, the suggestion was hailed with delight by the Committee.

The account is plausible enough. At that time, Lea was living in Hardy's birthplace at Bockhampton, a tenant of one Hanbury, the then owner. Hardy was impressed with the accuracy of Lea's "guidebook" (as he called it), and must have had many contacts with him. However, it does not appear that the relationship was at all intimate. Lea's name is not even mentioned in *The Later Years* (1930).

The second version of the story comes to me secondhand, by word of mouth from the Rogers family, from whom, by way of that genial Dorchester antiquarian H. V. Day, I acquired my copy of the design. Their account is fortified by the recollection of some of the older men presently on the Dorchester postal staff. According to C. A. Topham, currently Head Postmaster at Dorchester, Rogers was reputed to have been quite friendly with Hardy "through their common interest in rambling" and "was one of the few people who had the privilege of visiting [his] home."

Rogers' full name was Thomas Herbert Rogers. I hoped he might turn out to be the "postman" whom Hardy's dog bit on the evening of October 28, 1921 (see Vere H. Collins, *Talks With Thomas Hardy at Max Gate* [New York, 1928], 48), but—alas—the worthy Rogers was no postman. He was a Sorting Clerk and Telegraphist, and he served behind the counter in the Post Office and in the telegraph room. However, there is still a chance that it might have been he, for "postman" is generic for any of the postal staff, and mail carriers rarely function in "gloom of night," notwithstanding the heroic legend.

Rogers was one of a six-man committee headed by Walter Drew, then Head District Postmaster, charged with obtaining

a suitable memorial tablet. The family's story is that the idea of inducing Dorset's first citizen to design the tablet was Rogers', but that he was reluctant to ask so substantial a favor of Hardy, despite his evident friendliness. However, he finally agreed to do so, on condition that if successful he would be given the original drawing after the stone-mason had finished with it. Rogers had no trouble persuading Hardy to undertake the job, and the drawing was ultimately delivered pursuant to the arrangement. Lea had no part in the negotiations. In fact, there is some reason to suppose he was absent from Dorchester during most of the autumn of 1920. He is not reported as having attended the dedication on November 18th.

This version of the incident, and Hardy's knowledge of it, might well account for an otherwise apparently superfluous second sketch. The drawing used by the stone-mason, particularly a design of such distinguished provenance, would normally be returned to the artist, or at least be subject to his direction.

The tablet was cut by Algernon Grassby of Dorchester, from the "finest statuary marble," as Hardy had recommended. Three changes from the design were made. The names of B. L. Burden and A. C. Bell were transposed so as to follow a strict alphabetical sequence, and J. King of the sketch became A. J. King in the finished product. Centered periods were added at the end of each of the first two lines. The added initial for King is puzzling in view of the dedication program, which gives his full name as "Jack King." Another apparent error went uncorrected, even by mason Grassby—"J. C." Samways' proper name, as recorded in the dedication program, was James *George* Samways.

Hardy was of course invited to unveil the memorial. Here is his reply, made available to the writer by courtesy of the Dorset County Museum and published with permission of Miss Irene Cooper Willis. Except for the signature, I believe the handwriting is Mrs. Hardy's.

October 30, 1920

Dear Sir:

I am glad to hear that the Memorial Tablet is nearly ready. The service I rendered was a very small thing to do for the devoted men whose names appear in the list.

## Colby Library Quarterly

65

I much value the wish of the Staff and yourself that I should unveil the Tablet. But I feel that being already closely associated with it in designing it, & in putting words of my own as the epigraph, it would be better for somebody else to unveil it; also since that for physical reasons I am never sure of being able to keep an engagement in winter time nowadays. With sincere thanks for the request I am,

Yours very truly  
T. - H -

Walter Drew, Esq.,  
Post Office  
Dorchester

Through the kindness of Mr. Topham, I have a copy of the program of the "Unveiling Ceremony." It seems somewhat over-extended, as these affairs often are, but one may not gain-say the moving dignity of devotions in the classic pattern of the Book of Common Prayer. And if that portion of the exercises noted in the program as "The Address" kept itself within bounds, I have no doubt the occasion was a fitting tribute to brave men, long to be remembered by those left behind.

The Mayor and Mayoress of Dorchester were in attendance, as were many postal authorities, officers of the Dorset regiments, relatives of the men named on the tablet, and a goodly representation of Dorchester citizenry, including Mrs. Thomas Hardy. The actual unveiling was done by Mr. F. Makepeace, Surveyor G. P. O., South Western District.

To me, this story is more revealing of Hardy's essential character than many of the details in Hardy biographies. Mrs. Hardy, for example, records that he caught one of Lady Malmsbury's green linnets, that he heard Lottie Collins sing "Ta-ra-ra" at the Gaiety Theatre, that he had tea with "Miss Jones." Hardy was a shy man, almost a recluse. He was not noted for geniality, his hospitality was spotty and, for the most part, ungenerous. His life was strangely devoid of close personal relationships. And yet in this instance we find a man deeply moved not only by the futility of war but by the private tragedies that follow in its wake; a man who "rambles" with postal clerks; a hardbitten pessimist who, at 80 years of age, will spend time and loving thought in the design of a memorial to men of his hometown whom he never knew. Here was a Hardy who, with unerring sensitivity to the spiritual impact of phrase, could

lift out of context one line of a second-rate sonnet and vest it with imperishable dignity. These matters seem somehow more worthy of contemplation than the capture of Lady Malmsbury's linnet. But the biographies contain no word of the tablet episode.

Even more surprising is the silence of Richard L. Purdy on the subject. His bibliographical study of Hardy reports the second reprint of a variant of the "Song of the Soldiers' Wives," and meticulously recites the measurements of the paper upon which Hardy copied various poems for T. J. Wise. Surely Professor Purdy, many times a visitor at Max Gate, close friend of Mrs. Hardy, aware and tenacious of countless bibliographical minutiae, must have known of this memorial. He may have concluded that editions in stone are not worth recording. It would seem that this one has warmth, and a moving significance.



#### HARDY HOT AND COLD

THE power of books to elevate man above circumstance is truistic. Literature glitters with examples of escape from the vexation of mundane affairs to the headier realm of spirit. "There is no frigate like a book," exclaimed one poetess, and mind reverts instantly to Keats' first ecstatic glance into Chapman's *Homer* and the "many goodly states" to which it transported him, far beyond the clutch of mortal pain.

Frail, tubercular John Keats is a far cry from Dublin's Brendan Behan—prodigious brawler, Rabelaisian tippler, and irreparable pantaloons—but in their antithetic ways they shared the experience of sublimation. When the world was too much with Behan, he looked into a book and the world vanished. That the book was Thomas Hardy's masterwork of rural life, *Under The Greenwood Tree*, brings Behan's short but happy transmutation into the orbit of our interest.

If, recently, you skimmed through the news reports of Behan's sumptuous misdemeanors in British pubs and theatres,