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THOMAS HARDY AS COLLEGE STUDENT

By Carl J. Weber

The Colby College Library has recently acquired a book that is drab enough in outward appearance, but one that casts a ray of light into a corner of Hardy's life that has hitherto remained dark. The new acquisition is a textbook entitled Half-Hours of French Translation, edited by Alphonse Mariette (London, Williams & Norgate, 1863). Its close connection with the early life of the Wessex novelist is attested by his signature on the front fly-leaf, "Thomas Hardy, 1865," and by the words written in his hand on the half-title, "King's College, London."

Very little has been known about Hardy as a college student. His own reticence is largely responsible for this fact, for in the autobiographically inspired Early Life of Thomas Hardy compiled by Mrs. Hardy, there are only three eel-like sentences that refer to his brief experience in a college classroom. On page 65 one reads:

During his residence in London he had entered himself at King's College for the French classes, where he studied the tongue through a term or two under Professor Stievenard, never having taken it up seriously since in his boyhood he had worked at exercises under a governess. He used to say that Stievenard was the most charming Frenchman he ever met, as well as being a fine teacher. Hardy's mind had, however, become at this date so deeply immersed in the practice and study of English poetry that he gave but a perfunctory attention to his French readings.

The exact time when Hardy studied French "through a term or two" is not indicated in this quoted passage. The first sentence refers to "his residence in London," which might mean anything from 1862 to 1867; and the words "at this date" in the last of the three sentences offer little help. However, we are no longer in the dark. On Saturday, October 28, 1865, Hardy wrote to his sister Mary: "I think I told you I had joined the French class at King’s College."

And on page 310 of the textbook now in the Colby Library Hardy recorded the date, March 6, 1866, when the French
class reached this page. We are thus enabled to assign Hardy’s “term or two” quite definitely to the fall term (October to December) of 1865 and to the winter term (January to March) of 1866.

More than half a century later, when Hardy was recalling his brief experience as a student at King’s College, he was still aware of the fact that he had given “but a perfunctory attention to his French readings.” His textbook contains, in fact, no evidence of his mastery of French or even of his study of the French language at all. He was busy with other things. When, for example, Professor Stièvenard’s class reached page 212 in their *Half-Hours of French Translation*, Hardy noted (but not in French) the quotation found there from Thackeray’s novel *The Newcomes*: “Yonder sit forty cherry-cheeked boys, thinking about home. . . .” One may well doubt whether the twenty-five-year-old “boy” from Dorchester was cherry-cheeked, but there can be no doubt whatever that Hardy sat there in the King’s College classroom “thinking about home.” For, on the rear fly-leaf of his textbook, he made a reference to page 212 (where the Thackeray quotation is printed) and drew a rough map and made a landscape sketch, both in pencil. The map shows the Wessex coast from Portland Bill to the town and harbor of Weymouth, and the coastal landscape portrays the rock at Portland, as seen from the coast just east of Weymouth. Students of the Wessex novels will at once recognize that Hardy thus sketched and charted, in his 1865 textbook, the setting which he was shortly to choose for use in *Desperate Remedies*, in parts of *Under the Greenwood Tree*, in *The Trumpet-Major*, and in *The Well-Beloved*.

The French textbook contains two parts: one, a series of “extracts from the best English authors, to be rendered into French”; two, “passages translated from contemporary French writers to be re-translated.” The marks left in the book by Hardy’s pencil indicate an eye alert for the striking phrase, the challenging thought, the sententious aphorism, the sage generalization. In later years Hardy’s memory
of these two terms in college led him to think that he had then been "deeply immersed in the practice and study of English poetry," but his textbook does not support this claim. On the contrary it leads one to suspect that he had already transferred his study if not his practice from poetry to prose, and that he might, in 1865-1866, have said with his own hero Springrove, "Poetical days are getting past with me, according to the usual rule" (Desperate Remedies, III, 2). In fact, more than one prose passage not only in Desperate Remedies but also in other novels written at a later date are now seen to be echoes out of Hardy's book of French readings. On page 267 of Half-Hours, for example, Hardy underlined William Cobbett's observation that "men fail much oftener from want of perseverance than from want of talent," and in the third chapter of Desperate Remedies he wrote of "adherence to a course with perseverance sufficient to ensure success."

In Part I of the textbook Hardy underlined such passages as "The old cares are left clustering round the old objects" (from Samuel Rogers' Italy) and "Man has a secret instinct . . . which springs from the sense of his continual misery" (from Hallam's translation of Pascal). In Part II, Hardy marked "centenary oaks," "fear is more nimble than gratitude," "a lively imagination and a sensitive heart only promise a stormy life to those who possess them," and other such passages. Many of these obviously found response in Hardy's own mind and heart and were later echoed in his writings. Space is lacking to trace here the parallel utterances, but Hardy's copy of Half-Hours now invites closer study in the Colby College Library.