

# Colby



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## A Visit To Max Gate

Walter Peirce

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UACHTARAN NA HEIREANN

(President of Ireland)

BAILE ATHA CLIATH

(Dublin)

Dean Ernest Cummings Marriner,  
Colby College,  
Waterville, Maine. U. S. A.

Dear Sir,

July 30th 1949

I hope I may be permitted to offer you my very sincere thanks for your great kindness in presenting to me an autographed copy of your excellent appreciation of "Jim Connolly and the Fishermen of Gloucester" with its valuable bibliography.

This welcome gift brought me real pleasure. I have read your appreciation with the keenest interest and much enjoyment. If I may say so without impertinence, I found the quality of its writing quite distinctive.

I was made happy too by the knowledge that our friend Jim Connolly was receiving this splendid tribute while still spared to us—so many such tributes are unfortunately delivered when those to whom they should bring most pleasure have been called to their reward. Certainly your touching words must have brought much joy to the octogenarian heart of Jim Connolly.

Be assured, kind sir, that we here in Ireland, the land of Jim's forebears, are grateful to you and those of your friends of Colby College who associated themselves with you in this gracious gesture to this noble hearted, high minded child of our blood, whose gifted writings have won him such fame in your Land of Liberty and home of generosity.

With apologies for this intrusion,

I have the honor to remain  
gratefully and sincerely yours,

SEAN O'KELLY



### A VISIT TO MAX GATE

By WALTER PEIRCE

**I**N the summer of 1909 I found myself for the third time in Casterbridge. In 1906 I had first visited it and had explored the ancient town itself, and Pummery Camp and Maiden Castle and the Ring. I had tramped Egdon Heath and discovered Bloom's End and Mistover and Rainbarrow and the cottage in the pines where Clym and Eusta-

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cia had lived out their brief romance. I had pushed on to Weatherbury and Bathsheba's farm and the churchyard where Fanny Robin lay, and I had seen King's Bere with the great window of its church dedicated to the glory of the Turbervilles. Finally, I had gone to the Dorset County Museum and made the acquaintance of the curator, Mr. Voss, Hardy's contemporary, friend and one-time schoolmate. He not only furnished me with valuable indications on the identity of scenes connected with the Wessex novels, but insisted that I should meet Mr. Hardy. The latter would be delighted to meet anyone interested in his work, I was assured, but unfortunately he was in London at the time. I was not so certain of a welcome awaiting me at Max Gate, but if the owner had been at home I would have taken the chance. I went to Casterbridge again in 1908 and extended my explorations, but again Mr. Hardy was absent. Finally, when I returned the following summer and went to the museum, I was greeted with the ecstatic news that this time the author was at home and that I really must meet him. I sent a brief note asking the great man if he would be good enough to receive me, and the next day I got the following reply:

Max Gate,  
Dorchester.  
Monday 9 : 8 . '09  
[i.e., August 9, 1909]

Walter Peirce, Esq  
3 St Helen's Road  
Dorchester

Dear Sir:

Your letter is to hand. I am here just now, and if you should be passing to-morrow afternoon about 4 or half-past, I shall be at home, should you wish to ask any guidance.

Yours truly

T. H.

I need hardly say that I found it convenient to be passing Max Gate at the hour suggested on the following day. There have been moments in my life when I was less nervous than I was as I walked through the shrubbery and

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waited before the door. It was opened by the housemaid, but before she could take my hat and stick Thomas Hardy in person was before me. He relieved me of my impedimenta and showed me into the drawing-room, placed me in the best chair but immediately took me out of it to put me in another with my back to the window, while he faced the light. The room was spacious and, I suppose, well furnished, but I recall nothing in it but the author's portrait by Jacques Blanche, which I had a chance to compare with the original sitting immediately beneath it. It was this original that occupied my attention to the exclusion of everything else. Thomas Hardy was a little small man, as his Dorset neighbors would have said, with their fondness for doubling adjectives. Mr. Voss had assured me that he was a plain common man, using both terms in their complimentary sense. Mrs. Hardy, he added, was a proud haughty woman. Hardy at this time was sixty-nine years old, but looked much younger. His hair was thinning and mixed with grey, and his small moustache was grey, but his face was fresh and very little lined. The most noticeable feature was his eyebrows, which had an upward twist at the outer corners and, together with the turned-up ends of his moustache, gave a humorous cast to his expression, like that of a small gnome. There was nothing sinister in it, nothing that suggested the pessimism, the fatalism or the tragedy of his great novels. He was an English country gentleman receiving a guest, and he was courtesy itself.

My first questions were topographical, and he cheerfully set me right on the location of places that I had visited or wished to visit, and confessed to those that he had invented. It must be said that these were very few, and that for the most part Wessex can be—and has been—as accurately mapped as Dorsetshire and the other counties in the southwest. When I was satisfied on these points we went on to the impression his novels had made in America, in which he was much interested, and he was pleased

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to know that I had seen Mrs. Fiske in *Tess*. He himself had never met her or seen the play. At this time D'Erlanger's opera founded on the novel was in rehearsal in London, but the creator of *Tess* seemed only mildly interested. He said that the story had been changed a good deal, and that the final scene took place behind a transparency: "a sort of apotheosis, I suppose." He had not attended the rehearsals.

I told him how much I admired *The Return of the Native* and how it had left me purged by pity and terror. "Yes, I suppose it might be called Greek in spirit, unity of place and theme, and all that." And, I might have added, fatalism. I told him how I had explored Egdon in the traces of Clym and Eustacia and Wildeve and Thomasin, how I had tramped from Clym's cottage to Bloom's End on a torrid August day to see if it was as hot as Mrs. Yeobright had found it on her fatal journey, and had discovered that it was quite as overpowering but had met no adders. I told him that I had gone up into the heath from King's Bere at twilight and sat there to see if the dark came up from the ground and not down from the sky, and had found that it did, and that haggard Egdon was never more impressive than at this hour of dusk. I said that *Egdon Heath* would have been the right particular title for the novel, and he replied: "Perhaps it would, but the heath is implied in the title I gave it: a man returning to his native heath, you know." When I told him that I had found the spot where Troy's flowers had been washed away from Fanny's grave by the downpour from the gargoyle, he laughed and said: "I came it rather strong that time, didn't I?" I said that I had been interested in seeing reddled sheep. "What did I call that reddleman I put in the *Native*?" "Diggory Venn." "Ah yes, Diggory Venn, thank you." And again: "That novel with Dick Dewy and Fancy Day in it, you know." "*Under the Greenwood Tree*." "Of course, *The Greenwood Tree*, thank you." If he did not recall the names of his novels and characters as promptly as I did, it must

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be said that this was fourteen years after the publication of his last story, *Jude the Obscure*, and that in 1909, after the appearance of the third volume of *The Dynasts*, his novels were far behind him, and he was much more interested in the reception the public would accord to his poetry. "If my name lives at all in the history of English literature, and some critics seem to think it will, it will be as a poet and not as a novelist." From this he went on to an appraisal of his work: he regarded his poetry as his most satisfactory achievement, his short stories next and his novels last of all. As to poetry, he thought his reputation would rest on *The Dynasts*. Of his stories, his favorite was *An Imaginative Woman*, "the best piece of prose fiction I ever wrote." This story I had never read, or even heard of, but I found it afterward tucked into a later edition of *Wessex Tales*. In spite of its author's predilection it seems to me not to be compared with the five masterpieces that originally composed that volume or to those in *Life's Little Ironies*. He considered *Jude* to be the best of his novels, the one in which he had said all that he had to say. I mentioned *Tess* and its great success with the public. "Oh, there was a certain bit of melodrama in *Tess*, and then, there was a sort of challenge on the title page: a pure woman, faithfully presented. I suppose that made people talk." It did. He returned to *Jude*, and there was still some bitterness in his tone when he recalled its reception by the critics. Meredith's last novel, *The Amazing Marriage*, appeared in the same year as *Jude*, and he told with amusement of the critic who referred to their authors as Meredith the Obscure and the Amazing Hardy, but he had no forgiveness for the one who christened the novel *Jude the Obscene*. As to the characters, he had hoped in Sue to portray the modern woman: the "new woman" was very much in the air in the nineties. Returning to Meredith, who had died only a few months before, he spoke of him with appreciation and affection. I told him that Meredith's novels had never secured the public favor in America that his own

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novels had, and that the Hardy characters were more on the level with our own society and hence more within our comprehension. "Yes, to understand Meredith I suppose one would have to be familiar with the various strata of English society—and even then!"

At this point the tea table appeared, and with it Mrs. Hardy, in a flowered frock and a wide hat, looking the part of a British matron on her way to a garden party, which was indeed the case. After tea she reminded her husband that they were already late for such a party, at which he made a wry face and was kind enough to say that he would much prefer to continue our talk. He not only saw me to the door, but walked with me through the shrubbery to the gate, and cordially invited me to come again. He somehow conveyed the impression that I had done him an honor in coming to see him, and I walked back to Casterbridge feeling that I had spent an hour or so not only with a very great man but with a most genial host.



### NOTES TOWARD THE DEFINITIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THOMAS HARDY'S

*Poems of the Past and the Present*

By BENTON L. HATCH

CARROLL A. Wilson, in *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Grolier Club Centenary Exhibition, 1940, of the Works of Thomas Hardy, O. M., 1840-1928* (Waterville, Me., Colby College Press, 1940), discusses certain typographical points in connection with two of the three copies of Hardy's *Poems of the Past and the Present* exhibited (*vide* nos. 162-164), namely: the page numbering on pages 12 and 23, and the "N" in the title of the poem on the latter page. In the Robinson Treasure Room of the Colby College Library, there are four copies of this title which have several combinations of the points mentioned by Wilson. As a possible