

# Colby



Colby Quarterly

---

Volume 5  
Issue 4 *December*

Article 4

---

December 1959

## Hardy Hot and Cold

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

---

### Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 5, no.4, December 1959, p.66-69

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.

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 pantaloon—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,

you may have missed the postscripts on his soberer accomplishments as playwright and autobiographer. A buoyant phrase-fashioneer of the four-letter school, Behan is most generally known for *The Quare Fellow*, a poignant, bawdy, grisly-comic drama of prison life and death, and for *Borstal Boy*, his occasionally obscene recall of prison days and nights, described feelingly by Francis Brown as "sometimes grim, sometimes rollicking, often poetic and always Irish."

*Borstal Boy* is the livid account of Behan's tenure as a Y.P. (Young Prisoner) from the day he is apprehended with a suitcase full of explosives to his release three years later from the Borstal institution at Hollesley Bay. A bombing emissary for the Irish Republican Army at sixteen years of age, he is captured in Liverpool and consigned to Walton Prison to await trial and sentence. Here, amid incredible filth and violence, the only consoling ray is the weekly allotment of two books to each prisoner: no choice, no exchange, one volume of fiction and one of "educational" value selected dogmatically by the "library screw."

Behan's first pair of books, proffered almost immediately after a brutal beating, is a biography of General Booth and *Under The Greenwood Tree*. Reluctant to use up a page of either, he scrutinizes the flyleaves avidly, looking forward to a "read" in the evening. He had already read a version of the Salvation Army leader's life, so he merely pecks at this one, jealously apportioning his time to the novel. It contained some 200 pages, an average of about 30 per night. Following work that afternoon, he scrupulously reads no more than his ration.

After some bloody fisticuffs with another prisoner, Behan is locked in his cell, elated over the damage he has inflicted. Because of his mood and because he feels that the book may be taken from him in the morning, he celebrates with "a bit of a read extra," hooting lustily at the patty cake courtship of Dick Dewy and Fancy Day. Although his punishment includes solitary confinement on bread and water, he is not deprived of the novel. The season is Christmas and his eye lingers over the carol sung by the Mellstock Parish choir at the seemingly empty schoolhouse on Christmas Eve. To dispel the loneliness and tedium, he adapts the "simple and honest" words of the hymn

## 68 Colby Library Quarterly

to the tune of "Famine Song," which lamented the Black Year of '47. Behan walks his cell humming this bizarre combination and committing all four verses to memory. In this manner the ordeal of bread and water and stone passes, and the heart within his travailed body could whisper, "I never felt the time going."

At 8 o'clock he is permitted his mattress and blanket again. Now he reads recklessly on to the conclusion—of the tranter's kindness to Thomas Leaf and the wedding feast of Dick and Fancy. Warm, joyous, and profane about addled Tom's tale of the accumulating pounds, Behan falls beneficently asleep. Next evening, though he had finished the book, he has another look at the carol, mutters it to himself, hums it till the bell sounds, gets into bed and reads it over until lights-out. He lies in the dark, contemplating his trip to court in the morning, excited but happy.

Thus, to Hardy as to Chapman and to other gifted writers, comes a rarefied moment of beatitude earned by the sheer inspiriting sway of words. We might wish that the spiritual serenity induced in tumultuous Breandán Ó Beachain had outlasted the brief Yuletide interlude, but we must be thankful for even transitory miracles. Who knows but that some day the Hibernian behemoth may bed with another of Hardy's works and succumb to a more enduring vision.

Lest Hardy be too quickly classified a redeemer *nonpareil*, we hasten to introduce as evidence a postcard from the manuscript files of Colby College Library written by the Scot physician and novelist A. J. Cronin (*The Citadel, The Keys Of The Kingdom*). With devastating precision, Cronin applies a scalpel to what could well become the start of a Hardy mythology. Nettled by sundry critics' insistence that his characters "owe much to Hardy," the good doctor retorts that this could only be "a strange co-incidence." Then, in italicized outrage: "*I simply cannot read Hardy* and beyond a few pages of 'Jude' am ignorant of his work." How curiously unaffective was Hardy's art in this upland of advantage contrasted to the luminescence it spread in the lower depths. Was it the difference between stinking cell and air-conditioned suite, between *Under The Greenwood Tree* and *Jude the Obscure*, or between Behan

## Colby Library Quarterly 69

and Cronin? Where does one begin to measure intangible impact? Much simpler the parlor-game speculation of what Keats (an apprentice surgeon) might have writ upon first looking into *The Dynasts*, or what atonements might have moved François Villon (a swaggering scapegrace) could he in durance vile have read of Tess.

Two scintillae to round off the record: (1) While still awaiting sentence, Behan complains about his reading fare—this time it comprised a *Chums* annual for 1917 and a Selfridge furniture catalogue—and receives in replacement *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. For those anticipating another mystic introversion, alas, there is only disappointment. Behan utters not a word pro or con respecting this second Hardy selection. (2) An even sharper coincidence than the one Cronin mentions above crops up in Behan's scathing portrait of a humorless English prison medico who goes about "sighing like the doctor in *The Citadel*." (Of such small arcs are vicious circles made.)



### BRYANT AND ELIZABETH OAKES SMITH: AN UNPUBLISHED BRYANT LETTER

By ROBERT H. WOODWARD

AMONG the group of now almost unremembered writers who constituted the literati of New York City during the 1840s and 1850s were a husband and wife from 'Way Down East—Mr. Seba Smith and Mrs. Elizabeth Oakes Smith. Seba Smith's reputation in literature is now secure. The famous "Jack Downing," who pursued his epistolary career of humorous political satire from 1830 to 1864, is perhaps better known than his creator, but he has earned for Smith an undisputed niche as the inventor of what Constance Rourke in *American Humor* terms the "Yankee oracle." In the path blazed by Major Downing followed a sizable train of dialect commentators on society and politics: Thomas C. Haliburton's Sam Slick, Lowell's Ezekiel Biglow, Orpheus C. Kerr, Artemus Ward, Petroleum V.