June 1945

Memories Of Thomas Hardy

Richard Rowley

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

Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, series 1, no.11, June 1945, p.170-172

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.
Colby Library Quarterly

ment’s mess sergeants whetted their knives for carving the Christmas turkey near the spot where Tess of the D’Urbervilles had once used a knife on Alec D!

And now another June arrives. Hardy’s birthday, June 2— the fifth since his centenary—provides a suitable occasion for devoting an issue of this Quarterly to his memory. The articles here printed come— if not from the four corners of the earth, at least from three of them. Mr. Richard Rowley, who sends us his “Memories of Thomas Hardy,” is the editor of the Mourne Press, in Newcastle, Northern Ireland. Professor C. L. Cline, who has recently been reading Colby College Monograph No. 8, is a member of the English Department in The University of Texas. And Dr. Marguerite Roberts is Dean of Women and Assistant Professor of English in McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. We are happy to have Ireland, Texas, and Canada join us in observing the birthday of Thomas Hardy.

MEMORIES OF THOMAS HARDY

By Richard Rowley

TWENTY years or so ago, I used to visit Thomas Hardy occasionally at Dorchester, when I stayed there with some relations, who were friends of his. An afternoon with Hardy was a delightful experience. Although he was then a very old man, he was as bright and alert and as much interested in his contemporaries as ever; and he was so modest, so unaware of his own great fame, so kind, natural, and unaffected, so free from jealousy and envy, that to listen to him, and to talk to him, was an inspiration.

He was more curious to know how other writers worked, than to discuss his own methods. But, once, when I told him that my friend, the Irish poet “A.E.,” believed that his
poems were dictated to him by angels, Hardy smiled rather sadly, and replied:

"Inspiration may be all very well, but if you want to write poetry, you must sit at your desk regularly so many hours a day, with pen and paper at hand—just as a grocer attends at his counter. You must be there, waiting for the call, although you may not write a line."

He also told me that he made a practice of writing out the first draft of a poem in prose. Afterward he hammered it into verse-form—"and that is sweat and agony," he said. Curiously enough, I read in Hone's *Life of Yeats*, that W. B. in later years made his first draft in prose.*

One morning, about two years before Hardy's death, I made a pious pilgrimage to Came Churchyard, to visit the grave of William Barnes, the Dorset poet who had been a great friend of Hardy's, though he was considerably his senior. Hardy was a great lover of his poems, and they merited his love, for Barnes was a true poet. I found the grave somewhat neglected and the grave-stone overgrown with lichen. As I walked back to Dorchester, I resolved to go to the local stone-cutter and commission him to clean up the head-stone. My journey took me past the avenue to Hardy's house. There I encountered Mrs. Hardy, who was returning from the town. I told her I had been down to Came and that I was going to visit the Dorchester stone-mason. "Would you mind if I asked you not?" she said. I must have looked somewhat surprised, for she added: "Mr. Barnes was a dear friend of my husband's. I am sure it would give him pleasure, if he were allowed to charge himself with such a pious task." I at once agreed to the suggestion, saying that such a service would come better from one Dorset poet to another.

* Professor William Haller, of Barnard College, Columbia University, has called the editor's attention to the fact that Ben Jonson followed a similar practice. See *Notes of Ben Jonson's Conversations with William Drummond of Hawthornden* (London, Shakespeare Society, 1842; p. 26): "His opinione of verses: That he wrott all his first in prose, for so his Master, Cambden, had learned him."
Even in old age, Hardy's conversation gave no hint of the underlying pessimism and melancholy of his nature. He was cheerful, quietly humorous, and very much interested in life and human beings; and he was not in the least bucolic. He was essentially a finished and well-bred man of the world. He had very charming manners, warm and cordial, and not too formal. He always made me feel that he was really glad to see me, and invariably pressed me to return. I have known a good many of the big men of my day. There were few of them who did not disappoint, on a closer view. But Hardy never disappointed even an enthusiast like myself. He always seemed to live up to my highest ideals of him, and did so, simply, naturally and without effort. He was much too great to pose.

"THE MAYOR OF CASTERBRIDGE"
AND WIFE-SALE IN ENGLAND

By C. L. Cline

No one who has ever read The Mayor of Casterbridge can forget its startling beginning — the sale of a wife by her husband. That Hardy is not inventing an incident which had no counterpart in the social fabric of the period we have the novelist's own testimony in the preface to the 1895 edition of The Mayor: "The incidents narrated arise mainly out of... the real history of the town called Casterbridge... [including] the sale of a wife by her husband...." Moreover the words of Henchard, the husband. "It has been done elsewhere — and why not here?" offer evidence that Hardy was aware that the Dorset incident was not an isolated one.

Students of social history know that, among the ignorant people of England in former times, wife-sale was a familiar