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THOMAS HARDY AND THE BARRENS

By EDWIN D. MERRY

Now I do not have to go to England,
For I have found Tom Hardy's Egdon Heath
Here in Maine—in Washington County's Cherryfield,
That high undulating, leady vastness
Called the Barrens.

Well-called indeed, you keen-sighted and meticulous chooser of names!
Take your place beside those other discriminating bards
Who called Maine places
  Misery Ridge, Sunset, and Stow,
  Friendship, Union, and Hope.

"The Barrens,"
My brother replied to my question about where to hunt last November first,
"We'll leave Sprague Falls at daylight,
Cross the field there
And pick up the blazed trail
To the Barrens.
Late years few people hunt the Barrens,
It's too hard and high and scratchy;
Feed's poor up there,
But when the guns start blazin' down in the swaley places
I suspect some deer'll
Break for the scraggly oak cover
Of the Barrens."

Whenever the sun shines
(But there was little sun that first day of hunting)
On this tormented dome of Washington County,
I think it hurts;
But then I think the Barrens
246 Colby Library Quarterly

Have been hurt by everything:
By rain, snow, hail, creeping lichen, hungering root,
Wedging frost—by the long-continuing
Frown of God.

Like Thomas Hardy's world in miniature,
I found the Barrens to be magnificent,
As northeast men and women have always been magnificent
In a raw-boned, set-jaw kind of way.
It's the shade of admiration that comes
When you see a headland or a pasture or a stubby growth
of trees
Standing, lost in spume and fury,
During whole days of Titanic struggle—
But in the end still standing,
Having taken the worst,
Scoured, tested, beautified,
As old warriors are always beautified
By the contortions and scars of their struggles.

Nowhere else upon this planet
Have I yet found —
In art, in music, in human demonstration,
Or in nightmare —
An outlay of phenomena which so accurately portrays
The fate and face of man,
Writhing upon his rack of doubt;
Warped by the heat of fires that fanned up from
The glowworm spark of a careless generation;
Frustration-contorted, as was Zeus-sired Tantalus,
A-thirst but never quite closing upon the dangling grapes.

Whimsy, mockery, and humor
Are all here in the Barrens,
Thomas Hardy.
I shall not have to seek out your Wessex, as I had thought.
To be sure, I did not find
Your Rainbarrow, Alderworth, or Mistover;
Nor did I meet your Reddleman, the Yeobrights,
Or Eustacia Vye.
But for one soul-stretching day
I tramped, skidded, painfully exulted
Through the same elemental terrain.
That for a short period sustained
And then killed
Your people —
I have lived one day on Egdon Heath.
I did not meet your raven-haired, environment-containing Miss Vye;
But I have caught my clothing
On scrub oak, as she often caught her hair,
And I have twisted as she did
To be free.
I have — in my time — seen two honest portrayals
Of our human predicament:
I have read your writings, Bard of Wessex;
I have walked one day upon the Barrens.

THOMAS HARDY’S “THE THREE TALL MEN”
By FRANK R. GIORDANO, JR.

Among the valuable items in the Thomas Hardy collection at the Colby College Library is a rough-draft holograph of the poet’s “The Two Tall Men.” This work, however, is not found in the collected edition of Hardy’s poems, for the author revised and expanded it into “The Three Tall Men” before publishing it in Winter Words. Carl J. Weber suggests correctly, I think, that the poem was one of the latest Hardy composed. But Weber does not analyze the importance of Hardy’s “false starts and second thoughts, his deletions and later additions, his substitutions and transpositions.”¹ Much can be learned about Hardy’s craftsmanship, style, and objectives in metrical experimentation from such an analysis of his revisions. Nor should the opportunity to observe the poet, laboring in his workshop to vitalize an uninspired draft, be missed. The present essay, then, will study the textual changes made by Hardy in transforming raw poetic matters into a finished poem.

At this point it would be well to reproduce Hardy’s draft of “The Two Tall Men.” “The Three Tall Men” is found on pages 38-39 of Winter Words, the volume published in 1928 by Macmillan.