

The background is a detailed landscape painting. A dirt path winds through lush green vegetation, including tall grasses and various shrubs, some with small purple flowers. The path leads towards a horizon where the sun is setting, creating a warm, orange and yellow glow in the sky. The sky transitions from a deep orange near the horizon to a darker, more muted tone at the top. In the distance, rolling hills or mountains are visible under the soft light of the sunset.

HARDY LANDSCAPES

Gordon Beningfield

Introduction

In the early years of this century, the local amateur dramatic society in Dorchester put on various dramatisations of episodes from Thomas Hardy's works. Among the Hardy Players, as they came to be known, was a young actress called Gertrude Bugler, who became the star of the company and played several of Hardy's heroines, including Marty South in *The Woodlanders* in 1913 and Eustacia Vye in *The Return of the Native* in 1920. In 1924, Hardy's own stage adaptation of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* was put on in Dorchester, and Mrs Bugler's performance as the tragic Tess Durbeyfield entranced not only him but some of the London critics who had made the journey especially to see the play. Plans were made to transfer the production to London, with the beautiful young actress in the title role. But a few months before the London rehearsals were due to start, Hardy's second wife, Florence Hardy, paid an unsolicited visit to Mrs Bugler and implored her to refuse the role, on the grounds that Hardy would insist on attending the London performances, and that this would endanger his health. Gertrude Bugler gracefully withdrew, allowing Hardy to believe that she had done so for the sake of her family. (She was, however, finally to play Tess in the West End with Mrs Hardy's blessing in 1929, a year after Thomas Hardy's death.) On hearing of her apparent change of heart, Hardy wrote to her saying, 'I do not believe that any London actress will represent Tess so nearly as I imagined her as you did.'

I have been privileged to spend many hours talking with Gertrude Bugler, and it is easy to see why Hardy was so captivated by her. Despite her ninety-three years, she is still extremely striking, with an indomitable spirit and a wonderful sense of humour. Quite recently I saw her after she had been extremely ill and was still very weak. As usual we talked about various places in Dorset that had associations with Hardy, and then suddenly she said, 'Well, it's no good just talking about the countryside, we'd better go and take another look.' And we set off on a trip through Hardy country that I shall never forget. Mrs Bugler clearly recollects the countryside as it was around Dorchester during her childhood and near Beaminster when she had moved there after her marriage. This contact with someone who knew Hardy, who interpreted the role of his most famous heroine to such effect during his lifetime and who has an intimate knowledge of the landscape which meant so much to him is a richer source of inspiration than anything I could have hoped for.

I started seriously pursuing my interest in Thomas Hardy twenty-five years ago. When I made my first trip to Dorset, I expected very little to be left of the scenery that was so vividly evoked by Hardy in his writings. But I discovered what was almost a dreamland of meadows, woodland, thickets, coppice, heathland, broad hedgerows flowing over into water-meadows, pools, streams and the remarkable range of wildlife that happily exists when all these habitats are left undisturbed. I have been going back at least three or four times a year ever since, so far never without a sense of excitement. People ask me why I don't live there, but I want it to remain a special place, far removed from everyday distractions. I go for one reason – to observe and work – and I want to be able to concentrate solely on that.

Even a hundred years ago, Hardy was aware of the threats faced by his beloved countryside, and urged people to value and preserve their natural inheritance. Too many interests are served by developing the countryside, instead of leaving it alone, for anybody to be complacent about the scale of possible destruction. Dorset may still retain more of the richness and variety of its landscape than has been saved elsewhere in southern England, but it is, like anywhere else, under siege. Local organisations and even individuals have made enormous efforts to safeguard their heritage, even buying up pieces of land that are of particular importance, and for this they deserve congratulation, but huge tracts of Dorset are so beautiful and irreplaceable that they deserve to be designated a national park. No better tribute could be paid to a writer who has delighted so many people with his evocations of the English countryside than affording proper protection to the heart of Hardy country. His readers and admirers should always be able to see for themselves that the dream-like landscapes he conjured up in his writings actually existed.

This book is a celebration of those landscapes, inspired not only by the more famous descriptions in the novels but also by Hardy's poetry, which, in his words, was 'the more individual part of my literary fruitage.'

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