

THOMAS HARDY

Reviewed by Diana Cooper

The battle over Thomas Hardy's work has been carried on since the nineteenth century in a cheerfully savage manner by critics of all persuasions. Article counters article; letter refutes letter in the learned journals; occasionally a book is written to "correct" current errors; this unites the critics in attack, and a flurry of publication continues, each critic hoist by his own petard. Dr. J.I.M. Stewart now joins the large body of Hardy critics with his new critical biography.

The first three chapters promise little, however. In turgid prose Dr. Stewart repeats what other Hardy critics have written and his discussion of Hardy's intellectual background is an example of hit-and-run polemics. Dr. Stewart has little resistance to the well-worn discussion of what he calls Hardy's "morbidity." He stresses this aspect of Hardy's work in the first three chapters but does not reach any conclusion, definition, or synthesis concerning this "morbidity." He finally does distinguish between the element of morbidity in Hardy's work and the element of morbidity within the author's mind. He says:

Hardy's temperamental pessimism, then was not uncontrolled and disintegrative, as in the writers of a decadence. It was but one aspect of a personality by no means pervasively unhealthy or atonic; and that personality held open and fruitful commerce with a character of marked strength, responsibility, and probity.

Fortunately, Dr. Stewart's introductory chapters do not accurately presage the rest of his book. Dr. Stewart undergoes a magical metamorphosis in terms of vision and language when he begins to discuss the individual works of Hardy. Hardy elevated the burden of existence to poetry. His rich, ecstatic movement of language, his lyrical enchantment with nature, and his sensitive use of symbol raise Hardy to one of the greatest masters of British literature.

Dr. Stewart offers an excellent discussion of Hardy's interpretation of tragedy. The controlling factor in Hardy's tragic works is not character, but rather a power beyond man, a power in opposition to man's will. The dichotomy between man and his world is resolved only in the destruction of man, and for Hardy this would always be tragic.

The essential elements out of which Hardy constructs his tragedy are the conflicts between the conscious hopes and dreams of man and the inexorable law of an unconscious fate.

Although the fabric of destiny has been pre-woven for Hardy's characters, they refuse the posture of a patient Griselda. They are capable of defiance and nobility of passion. Their great capacity to feel transforms their pain and death. Something is lost when Hardy's characters are destroyed. In Hardy's work characters come to grief through their instincts, the blind force of their passion, the lack of sufficient knowledge of the world around them and of the relentless forces outside of themselves. Yet his major characters have a dimension that transcends their social or existential position.

Although the tragic vision is somber, the aesthetic form of tragedy must nevertheless delight the consciousness. Therefore, a tragic work of art must have shapeliness, order, symmetry, completeness, significance and definition. In Hardy's work, a significant portion of the above is entrusted to his use of symbols, magic and myths. Dr. Stewart sensitively discusses Hardy's use of these devices. The mythical patterns in Hardy's work are more suggestive of the demonic than of the apocalyptic. Symbols make the evil in man artistically acceptable since certain symbols have been incorporated into the consciousness of Western man by repeated artistic development.

On another level, the folk superstition in Hardy's books is the looking for a past that cannot be recovered. It is the search for a world view that has become a heritage, a memory, and not the present experience of the time. Thus, the myths have become emotionalized, religious and moral by the nineteenth century. The loss of a people's traditions is for Hardy profoundly tragic. Of course, one of the most important reasons for this death of an old order was the steadily encroaching menace of industrialization.

But it is not Hardy's characters who are out of harmony with the natural laws, it is the world. The old and the new world cannot exist in harmonious juxtaposition. Ultimately, in his last novel, *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy envisions a new sensibility. In the death scene, Jude, suffering the agony of thirst, utters with consummate contempt the lament of Job for his birth. Jude's sensitivity and Sue's conviction of the inevitability of suffering lead

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Reviewed by John Viets

Time is running out on our vast and beautiful heritage of "natural" North America. Today it exists as only a kind of destroyed Eden. As for tomorrow, one is reluctant to think about it. Such is the thesis of Brooks Atkinson in his recently published collection of essays (some published in the *N.Y. Times Sunday Magazine*) entitled *The Land was Bright*.

Merely to read about the beauties of early, long-gone America is to experience a poignant wistfulness: "Like all the explorers of the coast (Hendrik Hudson) noted the fragrance that drifted seaward from the land." Verranzo, who had sailed up the Hudson in 1542, had reported that the "trees exhaled the sweetest odors"; and Juet remarked 85 years later that "very sweet smells" rose from the grass, flowers and trees. The land was so fertile that upriver, Juet said he found enough corn and beans in Indian gardens to fill three ships. . . and Breton, an English parson, remarked of the land that "the most fertile part of England is (of itself) but barren."

The illusion of unlimited abundance (for example there once were 60 million bison, by government estimate) has taken some centuries to die. But, says Atkinson, "in three booming centuries, the civilized white man from England and Europe tamed, cheapened and in some cases annihilated wildlife that had been developing for millions of years." Examples: "schools of cod so thick they impeded the movement of the ship" (in New York Harbor!); fruit trees that bore such a heavy weight of delicious fruit that "their very limbs were tron to pieces," not to mention the tens of thousands of ducks, geese, gulls pelicans, curlews, turkeys (25 to 40 lbs), squirrel hordes, deer thousands of parakeets—and in Kentucky millions of passenger pigeons, oaks ten feet in diameter and white pines with diameters of four and five feet, etc., etc. It was not at all uncommon then, in "shoots," to down hundreds of a species in a day.

THE BRIGHT

The central problem, according to Atkinson, "was and is the uncontrollable numbers of people that have torn the land apart." (And when we realize that world population is increasing by 72 million a year. . .) But he points up a collateral cause, certainly of almost equivalent importance, and it comes down to attitude: Following the English and European tradition, the settlers bought land, and not as custodians or partners (like the Indians), but as exploiters, to gain personal power, wealth and social prestige. Land was an instrument for personal success. . . Exhausting the fertility of one farm they moved on to a fresh one in the West. The Puritan ethic authorized and encouraged enterprises of a worldly nature; God not only approved but rewarded diligence, industry, ingenuity and success. He exacted no penalties for abuse of the land. . . They plundered America because no one valued natural resources that seemed to be limitless."

Only now, after three centuries, the extent of the destruction has gradually become recognized as wide, deep, and appalling. And nowadays we find corporations "following the primitive (and pioneer) custom of ravaging public resources for private profit." Our widespread water and air pollution (which he calls "the garbage" of a huge population that enjoys a high standard of living"), land depredations, oil spills, etc., are obvious and glaring examples.

LAND

Brooks Atkinson,
Doubleday, \$5.95

If the foregoing might be said to represent briefly put, the core of his charge and analysis, the greater bulk of the book concerns itself with specific areas of our vast land, many of them national parks, where the incursions of man continue and threaten the existence of what little remains of the once virginal paradise. Prefaced with fascinating and informative historical vignettes, he takes us through the Redwoods, the Grand Canyon (threatened by more dams and helicoptered intrusiveness), the Great Swamp (30 miles from Manhattan), the Florida Everglades, the Mississippi drainage basin, California Condors, and South Biscayne Bay.

Perhaps Biscayne National Monument (i.e. Park) in South Biscayne Bay presents the perfect paradigm of our modern dilemma. A 95,000 acre area of beautifully limpid water, with a few assorted islands or Keys, it is located 20 miles SSE of Miami. Saved from becoming a new seaport, and/or a large new condominium mecca by the action of concerned citizens, it is an area lovely beyond belief, especially in the observable aquatic life. But looming on the horizon, a clear industrial blot in such surroundings, are the ugly towers of Florida Power and Light. Yet, as Atkinson even-handedly points out, power companies have to "intrude" somewhere, and they only exist because of the demands of the people, not vice versa.

Florida Power, in fact, has been enlightened in its concern for conservation, and in fact has made a parkland out of its vast holdings for the benefit of the people. But more and more people want more and more power, and so two nuclear units have been licensed by the Atomic Energy Commission. But it has latterly become apparent that the outflow of necessary cooling water will be at a temperature that may very well, gradually but inevitably, kill or at least grossly alter the flora and fauna of the beautiful bay. No single individual or group can be blamed—for all concerned have been facing the problem with the best of good will—but the fact of too many millions of human beings can.

Written with the easy clarity which is his hallmark, Atkinson's book has been larded with character sketches and information of interest to the general reader.