WRITERS IN THEIR TIME
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The 86-year-old Thomas Hardy surrounded by characters from *The Mayor of Casterbridge* before the performance of the Barnes Theatre Company in Weymouth, 1926 (Trustees of the Thomas Hardy Memorial Collection in the Dorset County Museum, Dorchester)

WRITERS IN THEIR TIME

Thomas Hardy

Timothy Hands

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*For my teachers,
and especially David, Charles, Richard, John and Glenn*

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	viii
<i>General Editor's Preface</i>	ix
<i>Introduction</i>	xi
1 'I lived in quiet, screened, unknown': the Lives of Thomas Hardy	1
2 'Nearest neighbours closest friends': Hardy and the Romantics	32
3 'Fellow earth-men surge and strive': Hardy and Contemporary Society	60
4 'Yea, Great and Good, Thee, Thee we hail': Hardy and the Ideas of his Time	93
5 'How shall we ply, then,/Our old mysteries?': Hardy and the Other Arts	123
6 'Time/Part steals, lets part abide': the Critics of Thomas Hardy	156
<i>Chronological Table</i>	189
<i>Notes</i>	192
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	200
<i>Index</i>	203

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The genesis of the book is in a number of courses given over the past fifteen years, and the stimulating co-operation of many pupils and students in them is gratefully acknowledged. A special word is reserved on another page for my many teachers. Much of Chapter 4 was given to the Thomas Hardy Society Summer School in Dorchester in 1992, and published in *New Perspectives on Thomas Hardy*, edited by Charles P. C. Pettit. The material is here reproduced by kind permission of Macmillan Press.

Though helping little with the text proper, many people have assisted in its completion. These especially include my parents, my wife, Sheila Bennett, Peter Brodie, Alan Bullock, Reggie Burton, Anthony Phillips, Ian and Ann Smart, and the beautifully behaved young men of Galpin's.

General Editor's Preface

In recent years many critics and teachers have become convinced of the importance of recognizing that works of literature are grounded in the conditions of their production in the widest possible sense of that phrase – in the history, society, ideas and ideologies of their time, the lives and careers of their authors, and the prevailing circumstances of the literary market-place and the reading public. To some extent this development reflects both a disenchantment with the 'practical criticism' approach that held sway for so long in school, college and university teaching of literature and a scepticism towards the ahistorical biases encouraged by some more recent schools of critical theory.

It is true that lip-service has long been paid to 'background': the English Tripos at Cambridge, for instance, embodied the 'life, literature and thought' formula from its early years. Such an approach, however, tended to treat 'background' as distinct and detachable from literary works and as constituting a relatively minor, marginal and even optional element in the study of a text. What is now perceived to be in question is something more vital and more central: not a loosely defined relationship between certain novels, plays and poems on the one hand and 'history' or 'ideas' on the other, but an intimate informing and shaping of the one by the other. Colonialism in Conrad or Kipling, Christian theology in Milton or Bunyan, scientific discovery in Tennyson or Hardy, politics in Yeats or Eliot: these are not background issues against which the texts can be foregrounded but crucial determinants of the very nature of the texts themselves without which they would be radically different and which profoundly affect the way we understand and value them.

At the same time, as most teachers are ready to attest, even a basic knowledge of the historical and cultural conditions of past, including recently past, generations cannot be taken for granted. To many students, periods as recent as the 1930s or

the Great War are largely a closed book, while key concepts of earlier generations such as Darwinism or Puritanism, and major movements such as the spread of literacy and the growth and decline of imperialism, are known in the sketchiest outline if at all.

This series is intended to provide in an accessible form materials that will make possible a fuller and deeper understanding of the work of the major authors by demonstrating in detail its relationship to the world, including the intellectual world, in which it was produced. Its starting-point is not a notion of 'background' but a conviction that many, perhaps most, great writers are in an integral sense *in* and *of* their time. Each volume will look afresh at the primary texts (or a selection of them) in relation to the ways in which they have been informed and shaped by both the external and the ideological conditions of their worlds. Historical, political, scientific, theological, philosophical and other dimensions will be explored as appropriate. By understanding more fully the contexts which have made particular works what they are and not otherwise, students and others will be able to bring new understanding to their reading of the texts.

NORMAN PAGE

Introduction

Sometime in the late 1880s, Thomas Hardy copied in to his *Literary Notebooks* a passage from an article entitled 'The Decline of Art' in the magazine *Nineteenth Century*. The article was by Tennyson's friend F. T. Palgrave, then professor of poetry at Oxford, and quoted one of his predecessors in that post:

Mr M. Arnold has a fine remark, that 'for the creation of a master-work in literature two powers must concur – the power of the man, and the power of the moment.'¹

Despite Hardy's interest in this view, writing a volume on Thomas Hardy for a series on writers in their time is not easy. For Hardy, the series needs retitling. As writer he was novelist and poet; in period he was Victorian, Edwardian and, in the view of some critics, Modernist. Hardy had the power of several men, and lived through not a few significant moments.

Nor do the problems end here. Or rather, their ending is with Hardy's beginnings, with a biography full of false starts, concealed or mistaken feelings and misleading statements. Born in 1840 and mistaken for dead, Hardy died in 1928, ending a life he had written as well as lived. *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, nominally by Hardy's second wife Florence, was in fact almost exclusively planned and written by himself, Florence being left to manage those passages (such as that describing Hardy's death) which even the Grand Old Man of English Letters could not pen. Hardy's body was interred in Poet's Corner at Westminster Abbey, but his excised heart was placed in the grave of his first wife Emma, in Hardy's native parish of Stinsford. The dislocation is representative. Disabled (or in some cases liberated) by the lack of records which Hardy and his assistants so assiduously gathered together and destroyed, Hardy's biographers have searched for the true character and life of Thomas Hardy ever

since. Hardy the man, like Hardy the author and Hardy the creature of his time, is a difficult person to locate.

Selectivity is therefore unavoidable, not least with regard to works discussed. Accessibility to the general reader has been the guiding principle. Subsequent writers and readers have consistently disagreed with the verdict of 106 young writers, marshalled by St John Ervine, who in a tribute to Hardy on his eightieth birthday wrote: 'We thank you, Sir, for all that you have written ... but most of all, perhaps, for *The Dynasts*' (*Life*, p. 446). Hardy created – and finished – a whole idiosyncratic epic-dramatic genre with this extraordinary piece, but the present volume can have no mission for reclaiming the work from the widespread neglect posterity has accorded it. There has recently been a welcome critical trend to discuss all of Hardy's novels (fourteen, published 1871–95), and (less enthusiastically) to pay increased attention to his short stories. The former trend is reflected in this study; though, again for practical reasons, greater reference has had to be made to the moiety better known by the general reader: *Under the Greenwood Tree* (1872), *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), *The Return of the Native* (1878), *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), *The Woodlanders* (1887), *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895). These provide a representative glimpse of Hardy's experimentation with the novel form in, respectively, two early novels of pastoral exposition, one transitional novel of over-reaching expansion, two late novels of organic (if sometimes flawed) achievement, and two final novels of considered but provocative social exploration. A wide variety of poems is mentioned, though obviously it has only been possible for close attention to be paid to fewer than thirty. For the convenience of readers as bewildered by the choice of anthologies as the anthology selectors are bewildered by decisions over which of Hardy's 900-plus poems to include, these poems are when possible quoted in full.

Chapter 1 gives a general guide to Hardy's life and literary products. Chapters 2 and 6 form a frame for the remaining chapters and provide, respectively, a retrospect to the Romantic period and Hardy's interest in it, and a guide to Hardy's critical reputation, chiefly through a study of criticism published from Hardy's lifetime to the present day. The

remaining chapters cover Hardy's views on society, contemporary ideas and the arts. Each chapter is prefaced by a quotation from a Hardy poem. A Select Bibliography and a Chronological Table are provided at the end of the volume.

Quotations are taken from the Macmillan hardback New Wessex edition (1975–8). Chapter references (common to all editions of the novels) and references to Hardy's *Collected Letters* (Oxford, 1978–88) and *Life* (ed. Michael Millgate, London, 1984) are given in the text when appropriate.