THE

THE CONNELL GUIDE TO THOMAS HARDY'S

FAR FROM THE MADDING CROWD

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HELENA BONHAM CARTER

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE NOVEL IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by Phillip Mallett

The
Connell Guide
to
Thomas Hardy's

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Introduction

Far from the Madding Crowd marked a turning point in Thomas Hardy's career: his fourth published novel, but the first to be both a critical and a popular success. It was commissioned by Leslie Stephen, editor of the prestigious *Cornhill Magazine*, who had enjoyed the rural scenes in Hardy's second and most harmonious book, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, and thought *Cornhill* readers – for the most part middle-class, educated and urban – might welcome something similar. In response, Hardy offered him a "pastoral tale" in which "the chief characters would probably be a young woman-farmer, a shepherd, and a sergeant of cavalry".

He had played safe in *Under the Greenwood Tree*, and may have intended to do so again, with a story turning on romantic and marital choice. In the hands of most authors, the courtship plot was a conservative form, in which the heroine, though fickle or inexperienced enough to be tempted to choose the wrong man, learns from her errors in time to marry the right one at the end. "What should a woman do with her life?" asks the narrator of Anthony Trollope's *Can You Forgive Her?* (1865), before answering his question in the way readers of Victorian fiction came to expect: "Fall in love, marry the man, have two children, and live happy ever afterwards."

Hardy could certainly claim that he had given Stephen what he wanted, in a series of scenes devoted to sheep-shearing and harvest suppers, saving hayricks from fire and battling against storms, all leavened with a rustic humour which risks but stops short of caricature, and honouring both the skills of the workfolk (a term Hardy preferred to "labourers") and the sense of community that builds around them.

For better or worse – Hardy later grumbled that he had "not the slightest intention of writing for ever about sheep-farming" – *Far from the Madding Crowd* was the novel Victorian readers wanted him to write over and over. Andrew Lang, reviewing it in the *Academy*, was delighted by the pastoral elements: "when the sheep are shorn in the ancient town of Weatherbury, the scene is one that Shakespeare or that Chaucer might have watched. It is this immobile rural existence that the novelist has to paint." Over the next century and more, numerous critics, publishers and film-makers have followed Lang in reading Hardy as the historian and celebrant of an age in which the countryside was the wellspring of national greatness and the guardian of a quintessential Englishness: a world enduring, close-knit, self-sufficient, all but timeless.

But as critics such as John Goode, Raymond Williams and Linda Shires have pointed out, it requires considerable ideological wrenching to see *Far from the Madding Crowd* as a true romance of

country life, undisturbed by economic pressures and patriarchal sexual politics. As was to happen more than once over the next 20 years, what Hardy had promised as a quiet story suitable for family reading took off in unexpected directions. Bathsheba is not merely tempted to make the wrong choice, but does so, and is only saved from the lifelong consequences of her mistake when a third suitor, Farmer Boldwood, murders the husband who torments her. Rather than a "pastoral tone and idyllic simplicity", noted a critic in the *Westminster Review*, what marked *Far from the Madding Crowd* was its "violent sensationalism": marital desertion, illegitimacy, death in childbirth, murder, attempted suicide and insanity. If there was much that Leslie Stephen might have welcomed, there was much too to make him uneasy.

Yet this is not a dark novel. Nearly 30 years after its publication, Hardy wrote that it seemed to him "like the work of a youngish hand, though perhaps there is something in it which I could not have put there had I been older". That "something" has been variously identified as charm, amplitude, richness of incident and humour, the evocation of landscape and the rhythms of the work that shaped it, or, more broadly, the assurance that despite the sense that deep social and economic changes are imminent, the novel still holds out the possibility that the closing marriage will maintain the community and its traditional order a little longer.

All these elements are indeed present in the novel, and are a source of its continuing appeal. If even here, in the last work he was to write from his childhood home in Bockhampton, Hardy could not wholly ignore the darker aspects of rural life, *Far from the Madding Crowd* remains the warmest and most celebratory of farewells.

STEPHEN'S RED PENCIL

The manuscript evidence of *Far from the Madding Crowd* shows Leslie Stephen regularly red pencilling Hardy's text, on occasions as an experienced editor dealing with a young author who aimed to be "a good hand at a serial", but just as often to protect the *Cornhill*'s readers. Some of the resulting changes were trivial, as when "the buttocks and tails of half a dozen warm and contented horses" became "backs and tails". Others were more significant.

Stephen warned Hardy to treat the seduction of Fanny Robin in "a gingerly fashion", adding that he would "be glad to omit the baby" from the scene in which Bathsheba opens Fanny's coffin. Similar wary negotiations between author and editor were to mark much of Hardy's career until, after *Jude the Obscure* (1895), he lost patience, gave up novel-writing, and returned to poetry ■

A summary of the plot

Gabriel Oak, who by thrift and hard work has raised himself from shepherd to farmer, proposes marriage to the beautiful and spirited Bathsheba Everdene. She refuses him, and moves away to run a farm inherited from her uncle. Soon after, an inexperienced sheep dog drives Gabriel's flock over a cliff, leaving him ruined. He finds work on Bathsheba's farm, again as a shepherd, though for her sake he also acts as an unofficial farm bailiff.

In an idle moment Bathsheba sends a Valentine's card to a reserved local farmer, Boldwood, a man twice her age, but the joke misfires when he falls obsessively in love with her. A sense of obligation makes her feel she should marry him, but before she commits herself she falls for the handsome Sergeant Troy. Unknown to her, Troy has previously seduced and was about to marry one of her servants, Fanny Robin, until a misunderstanding caused the wedding to be abandoned. Rejecting the advice of the loyal Gabriel, and against her own better judgement, Bathsheba marries Troy.

The marriage soon proves unsuccessful, and collapses completely when Fanny returns to the area. She dies in childbirth; Bathsheba discovers her identity, and her connection with Troy, beside the coffin which contains both Fanny and her baby. Almost at once Troy leaves the area and is believed drowned, prompting Boldwood to renew his suit.

Worn down, Bathsheba agrees to marry him once the law allows her to do so, seven years after Troy's disappearance. But Troy has in fact returned, and on the night of a Christmas party at which Boldwood hopes to announce his engagement to Bathsheba, he enters to reclaim her as his wife. She screams; Boldwood shoots him, and tries to kill himself. Prevented from doing so, he walks to the jail, and is eventually confined for life as of unsound mind. A year later, the chastened Bathsheba hints to Oak that he should propose again; this time she accepts him, and they marry in "the most private, secret, plainest wedding that it is possible to have".

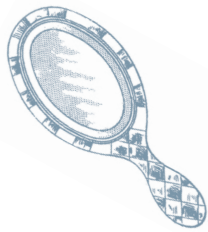
What is *Far from the Madding Crowd* about?

For many readers, the "very short and simple" subject of *Far from the Madding Crowd* (in Henry James's phrase) is the maturation of Bathsheba Everdene, from what James described with evident distaste as "a young lady of the inconsequential, wilful, mettlesome type... which aims at giving one a very intimate sense of a young lady's *womanishness*", to a woman with a renewed sense of social and personal responsibility, as she gradually surrenders to the "integrity and

simplicity and sturdy patience" of Gabriel Oak. Most recent critics have come to the same conclusion. Robert Langbaum views the novel as "a traditionally comic 'taming of the shrew' story". Alan Friedman speaks of Bathsheba's "taming", and her "cutting down to size" as a necessary "containment". Peter Casagrande traces a similar dynamic, but argues that despite her "severe schooling" by the events of the novel, Bathsheba is incapable of real amendment. Rosemarie Morgan picks up on the hints of misogyny that underlie at least some of these views (and in Casagrande's opinion are to be found in Hardy himself), but rather than development sees loss and diminution, as Hardy's

> vibrant, self-delighting, energetic heroine... blossoms into womanhood, ventures into business, into marriage, into the world of men, and is nullified. And Hardy is the lone mourner.

There is clearly some justice in these readings. The narrator appears to endorse them in his description of the "substantial affection" which arises between Oak and Bathsheba as "romance growing up in the interstices of hard prosaic reality". Commenting on these opposing terms, Roy Morrell thinks that the novel "disparages romance, the dream and the dreamer", as embodied in Boldwood's unreal conception of Bathsheba, or her vision of Troy ("brilliant in brass and scarlet"), or Troy's idealisation of the dead



OUR FIRST GLIMPSE OF BATHSHEBA

Hardy's approach to the craft of fiction can be briefly illustrated from the first chapter of *Far from the Madding Crowd*. Alone on a wagon, unaware that she is being observed by Gabriel Oak, Bathsheba – her name is not yet known to us – opens a small swing mirror, and gazes into it; she parts her lips, and smiles:

> *What possessed her to indulge in such a performance in sight of the sparrows, blackbirds and unperceived farmer, who were alone its spectators – whether the smile began as a factitious one to test her capacity in that art – nobody knows; it ended certainly in a real smile; she blushed at herself, and seeing her reflection blush, blushed the more.*

There are three perspectives here. Gabriel, the named observer, draws the "cynical inference" that the young woman is vain. The anonymous narrator, in apparent agreement, remarks on "woman's prescriptive infirmity", before going on to associate the smiles with thoughts of future triumphs in love, and hearts lost and won. But the point of view which matters most is the one we are explicitly denied, in the small intimate space between Bathsheba's eyes and the smiling and blushing face that she but not we can see in the mirror. As if to