

Events in France in the Period 1789 to 1815: Thomas Hardy and the French Revolutionary Wars

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ABSTRACT: Folk memory in Southern England from 1789 to 1815 can be seen at its first and most sensitively captured and duly recorded in the several not-so-fictional writings of Thomas Hardy, despite his birth being forty years later. For his novels and tales constitute an extraordinary act of empathy, of the recreation of folk life and of the patriotic jingles of the time.

Amongst the folk-memories and legends that are apparent in Dorset are those of Napoleon and the French Revolution. Events in France in the period 1789 to 1815—the French Revolution and the creation of the Napoleonic Empire—figured largely in the political life in Great Britain. The British government had actively resisted these events on the Continent. This opposition led to the distinct possibility of an invasion of England by Napoleon. With a long coastline facing France, England felt particularly vulnerable to such an invasion. This fear led the government, in about 1804, to begin building a series of defensive Martello towers, many of which still dot the coast today.

Although Thomas Hardy was born in Dorset some forty years after these momentous happenings, nevertheless, he drew inspiration from them. Hardy would have known the Martello tower at Poole Harbour. The folk-memories aroused by the fears of this potential Napoleonic invasion filtered into his imagination and provided much of the material to enrich his stories and poems. In fact, he saw it as his responsibility to record these historical events. As he explained to Rider Haggard,

For one thing, village tradition—a vast mass of unwritten folk-lore, local chronicle, local topography, and nomenclature—is absolutely sinking, has nearly sunk, into eternal oblivion... Thus you see, there being no continuity of environment in their lives, there is no continuity of information, the names, stories, and relics of one place being speedily forgotten under the incoming facts of the next.¹

¹ Hardy, F. E., *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, pp. 312-314.

His biography tells that he found copies of *A History of the Wars*, an old periodical taken by his grandfather, who had been a volunteer during the Napoleonic wars.² These wars and the French Revolution captured the imagination of both the Romantic Revival writers and then Hardy. He boasts, that ‘though healthy he was fragile, and precocious to a degree, being able to read almost before he could walk’,³ and that,

he found in a closet *A History of the Wars*—a periodical dealing with the war with Napoleon which his grandfather had subscribed to at the time, having been himself a volunteer. The torn pages of these contemporary numbers with their melodramatic prints of serried ranks, crossed bayonets, large knapsacks, and dead bodies, were the first to set him on the train of ideas that led to *The Trumpet-Major* and *The Dynasts*.⁴

These historical tales that gripped his young mind derived from the preparation for a possible Napoleonic invasion of England, and particularly Dorset, at the turn of the Eighteenth century. Mrs. M. O’Rourke, Hardy’s secretary provided some evidence when she wrote of him,

the only attempts to educate him came from his mother with her love of books and her fund of folklore and balladry, and the father fiddling the traditional tunes. There was also the gentle kindly grandmother who tossed History towards him on a sultry summer’s day: ‘It was like this in the French Revolution I remember...’

There was also his grandfather’s hoard of periodicals printed during the Napoleonic wars which he unearthed from a cupboard and read with avidity.⁵

The discourses that Hardy absorbed from his near relations would have filtered into his imagination and become absorbed into his own works. His maternal grandmother, Elizabeth (Betty) Hand, lived with the Hardys from 1842 to 1847 when her grandson would have been an impressionable seven years of age. Stories of her husband, George Hand, told to him by his mother ‘certainly contributed to some of Hardy’s books’.⁶

I would suggest that the grandfather most likely became the model for Grandfer Cattle in *The Return of the Native*. Book II Chapter 6 has that venerable character, in discussing Clym Yeobright, stating:

² *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 16-17.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

⁵ O’Rourke, M., ‘Young Mr. Thomas Hardy’, p. 11, in Stephens Cox, J., ‘Monographs on the Life, Times and Works of Thomas Hardy’, cf. also *Life*, p. 16, describing Hardy’s early interest in things Napoleonic.

⁶ Seymour-Smith, M., (1995), *Hardy* (London, Bloomsbury Publishing), p. 7.

'Really, there would have been nobody here who could have stood as decent second to him, or even third, if I hadn't been a soldier in the Bang-up Locals (as we was called for our smartness),' said Grandfer Cante. 'And even as 'tis we all look a little scammish beside him. But in the year four 'twas said there wasn't a finer figure in the whole South Wessex than I, as I looked when dashing past the shop-winders with the rest of our company on the day we ran out o' Budmouth because it was thoughted that Boney had landed round the point. There was I, straight as a young poplar, wi' my firelock, and my bagnet, and my spatterdashes, and my stock sawing my jaws off, and my accoutrements sheening like the seven stars! Yes, neighbours, I was a pretty sight in my soldiering days. You ought to have seen me in four !'⁷

And

'Afeard, no!' said the Grandfer. 'Faith, I was never afeard of nothing except Boney, or I shouldn't ha' been the soldier I was. Yes, 'tis a thousand pities you didn't see me in four!'⁸

It echoes the fears and the excitement of the period that would live on in memory. It is repeated in 'A Tradition of Eighteen Hundred and Four' which recounts Napoleon's supposed landing to make a reconnaissance in Dorset. The fictional narrator supposedly heard it from Solomon Selby, who was a shepherd boy at the time of the 'incident'. Martin Ray notes that 'Selby's name derives from that of James Selby, a mason of Broadmayne, Dorset. He is described in the *Life* as 'the quaint old man who worked forty years for Hardy's father, and had been a smuggler'.⁹ While the story 'draws on Hardy's research in the British Museum in 1878 and 1879,¹⁰ there is a possibility that Selby, whom Millgate¹¹ says lived between 1798 and 1879, is the source of many of Hardy's early Napoleonic tales rather than merely being a character in one of them. Selby had been a young man in the epic period of the Napoleonic Wars; he had worked for Hardy's father and he most likely related various family 'traditions' to the imaginative young son of his employer.

The Great Event and the Folk Memory

Like the bombing of Darwin or the fall of Singapore, events which still live in our memory today, these events both fascinated and terrified the inhabitants of Dorset. They inspired a number of stories like 'A Committee-Man of the 'Terror',¹² 'A Tradition of Eighteen Hundred and

⁷ *The Return of the Native*, Book II, Ch. VI.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Ray, M., (1997), *Thomas Hardy, the Textual Study of the Short Stories* (Aldershot, Ashgate Publishing), p. 21.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹¹ *The Life of Thomas Hardy 1840-1928*, ed. by M. Millgate (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1985), p. 591.

¹² In *A Changed Man*.

Four',¹³ 'The Melancholy Hussar',¹⁴ the novel, *The Trumpet Major*, and the massive dramatic poem, *The Dynasts*. Poems like 'The Sergeant's Song', 'Valenciennes', 'San Sebastian' and 'Leipzig'¹⁵ also deal with events of the wars. Probably 'The Alarm'¹⁶ best captures the image and confusion of the times,

'As for Buonaparte, forget him;
He's not like to land! But let him,
Those strike with aim who strike for wives and sons!
He describes the volunteers equipment,
'Now, to turn to marching matters:—
I've my knapsack, firelock, spatters,
Crossbelts, priming-horn, stock, bay'net, blackball, clay,
Pouch, magazine, flints, flint-box that at every quick-step clatters;
And finally, the volunteer
[He] gained the beach, where Yeomen,
Militia, Fencibles, and Pikemen bold,
With Regulars in thousands, were enmassed to meet the Foemen,
Whose fleet had not yet shoaled.

Hardy, with an eye for detail, and a memory for the jingles handed down to him, has re-constructed historical events on the Continent and their mnemonic effect on the people of Dorset, quietly placing them within his writings. He has skilfully created an historical background both for his narrator and the happenings and captured with a nice succinctness the mood of this historic period.

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Editors: Readers are referred to other nuanced contributions by David Cornelius to be found in *Australian Folklore* nos., 16, 18, 24, and 25. In their style and in the emotions aroused they both capture the lingering legends of the age from southern England, as well as afford a neat parallel to many aspects of the impact of the writings of Henry Lawson on later generations of Australians.

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¹³ *Wessex Tales*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ All from *Wessex Poems*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*