

## THE NAMING OF HARDY'S "DRUMMER HODGE"

The poem now known as 'Drummer Hodge' was published under the title of 'The Dead Drummer' on November 25 1899, as the British regiments lately dispatched to South Africa strove to raise the siege of Ladysmith. The second stanza confirms that the buried soldier was as young as drummers were wont to be, but we never learn where he fell, what his parents called him or who performed his makeshift funeral:<sup>1</sup>

They throw in Drummer Hodge, to rest  
Uncoffined – just as found:  
His landmark is a kopje-crest  
That breaks the veldt around;  
And foreign constellations west  
Each night above his mound.

Young Hodge the drummer never knew –  
Fresh from his Wessex home –  
The meaning of the broad Karoo –  
The Bush, the dusky loam;  
And why arose to nightly view  
Strange stars amid the gloam.

Yet portion of that unknown plain  
Will Hodge for ever be;<sup>2</sup>  
His homely Northern breast and brain  
Grow to some Southern tree,  
And strange-eyed constellations reign  
His stars eternally.<sup>3</sup>

To bestow a name on those who would otherwise have no memorial is one of the recognised offices of a poet.<sup>4</sup> Hodge, however, is not the name of a person but of a type, the townsman's sobriquet for

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hardy, Complete Poetical Works, ed. Michael Irwin (Ware, Herts.: Wordsworth, 1994), 80.

<sup>2</sup> I do not know whether Hardy would have endorsed the comment of M. Van Wyk Smith, Poetry of the Anglo-Boer War (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 147: 'Hodge's fellow men (note the emphatic but impersonal "They") merely throw him in, but the Southern Landscape harbours him as something precious'.

<sup>3</sup> Since "our stars" can also mean "our fate", it is possible that the sidereal rotation at the end of each stanza represents the inexorable play of cosmic forces. Cf. William Wordsworth, Complete Poetical Works (London: Macmillan, 1950), 115: 'Rolled round in earth's diurnal course,/With rocks, and stones, and trees'.

<sup>4</sup> Ecclesiasticus 44.9; Horace, Odes 4.9.25-28. The 'mute inglorious' Miltons and "guiltless" Cromwells of Thomas Gray's 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard' are remembered by Hardy in Tess of the D'Urbervilles (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978), 173, where Angel Clare discovers that the stereotype of Hodge conceals a diversity of figures, some 'Miltonic' and some 'Cromwellian'.

the rustic;<sup>5</sup> the pathos of the opening couplet lies in its failure to redeem the tenant of this grave from anonymity. Hardy himself had protested elsewhere that the townsman's Hodge is a caricature,<sup>6</sup> and if his hero 'never knew' the meaning of the veldt, the karoo or the southern constellations, it is clear that the blame must be laid at the door of those who tore him from his Wessex home and arrested the natural growth of his 'northern breast and brain'. To bury a soldier under the appellation of the man whose task it is to bring new life from the soil is a deft conceit, ye a simple one, which did not require a poet for its invention or the outbreak of a great war.

When Hardy was a young man, there were few contemporary writers whose satirical observations were so widely quoted as those of Douglas Jerrold. Not everyone would have agreed with the admirer who styled him the 'first wit of the age' in 1848;<sup>7</sup> on the other hand, as his grandson observed in the preface to a selection from his writings for the World's Classics in 1907, there were many who named him in the same breath as Thackeray and Dickens.<sup>8</sup> Among the pieces which the younger Jerrold thought worth preserving is an essay on 'The Folly of the Sword', first published in 1843.<sup>9</sup> With the earnestness for which he was famous,<sup>10</sup> Jerrold asks what could induce us to destroy the image of God in another being, and replies that the villain is imagination, who turns objects of deep pity into 'fiends of wickedness'. When a man takes up soldiering, imagination is reinforced by discipline, and all too willingly the shiftless Hodge becomes a tool of political malice:<sup>11</sup>

His ear is tickled with the fife and *drum*; or he is drunk; or the sergeant – the lying valet of glory – tells a good tale; and already Hodge is a warrior in the rough. In a fortnight's time you may see him at Chatham; or indeed he is one of those we marked in Birdcage Walk. Day by day the sergeant works at the block ploughman, and, chipping and chipping, at length carves out a true handsome soldier of the line. What knew Hodge of the responsibility of man? What dreams had he of the self-

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<sup>5</sup> See Mark Freeman, "The Agricultural Labourer and the 'Hodge' Stereotype", *Agricultural History Review* 49 (2001), 172-186 (quoting Hardy's 'Dorsetshire Labourer' at 174).

<sup>6</sup> "The Dorsetshire Labourer", *Longman's Magazine* 2 (1883), 252-269. For a critique of Hardy's pastoralism see K. D.M. Snell, *Annals of the Labouring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England 1660-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 378-399.

<sup>7</sup> Charles and Mary Cowden Clark, *Recollections of Writers* (New York: Scribner's, 1878), 286.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas Jerrold: *Mrs Caudle's Curtain Lectures etc.*, ed. W. Jerrold (Oxford: Henry Frowde), 1907, ix-x. See also Michael Slater, *Douglas Jerrold: A Life* (London: Duckworth, 2002), 1-6.

<sup>9</sup> D.W. Jerrold (ed.), *The Illuminated Magazine* 1 (1843), 206-211.

<sup>10</sup> Cowden Clark (1878), 273.

<sup>11</sup> Jerrold (1843), 208 and (1907), 416.

accountability of the human spirit? He is become the lackey of carnage, the liveried footman, at a few pence a day, of fire and blood The musket-stock, which for many an hour he hugs – hugs in sulks and weariness – was no more a party to its present use than was Hodge. That piece of walnut is the fragment of a tree that might have given shade and root for another century; homely, rustic people gathering under it. Now it is the instrument of wrong and violence, the working tool of slaughter. Tree and man, are not their destinies as one?

This essay was singled out for praise by a least one reviewer of the periodical in which it appeared;<sup>12</sup> an American observer of the cultural scene in London declared it a ‘capital production’,<sup>13</sup> and it was republished in the West Australian Sunday Times on December 31 1899.<sup>14</sup> It was thus sufficiently well-known to have come to Hardy’s notice before the writing of ‘Drummer Hodge’. Of course he might have dubbed his soldier Hodge without Jerrold’s prompting, but would he have dwelt on the ignorance of the ‘homely’ youth and twinned his fate with that of a senseless tree? It is true that he adapts all these motifs to a different purpose: the drum, connoting youth, excites our pity; Hodge’s ignorance is not the cause but the consequence of his fighting overseas;<sup>15</sup> his life is cut short by an accident of war, not by the hardening of his soul. For Jerrold Hodge is a docile block, an instrument for ‘use’ before he sees the field of battle, sporting the relic of a tree that once gave shade to his ‘homely’ neighbours; in Hardy’s poem, Hodge carries his homeliness with him to the veldt, and it is he who (in Jerrold’s words) becomes the ‘fragment of a tree’.<sup>16</sup> Yet such consistent dissonance between two texts is often the strongest evidence that one has inspired the other; it is the rift

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<sup>12</sup> Art Journal 5 (1843), 250. The review, as usual, was anonymous. See also The Illustrated London News, August 12 1843, 112.

<sup>13</sup> David Bartlett, London by Day and Night (New York: Hurst, 1951), 77, where he also accuses Jerrold of dipsomania.

<sup>14</sup> Available electronically at [trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/38506009](http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/38506009).

<sup>15</sup> Even had Hodge enlisted in September 1899, he would not have foreseen his dispatch to South Africa only two months later: see W.S. Churchill, The Boer War (London: Mandarin, 1990), 7-12.

<sup>16</sup> No doubt other associations are present. Psalm 1.3 likens the righteous man to a tree by flowing water. Ben Jonson, Complete Poems, ed. George Parfitt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), 213 inverts the simile: “It is not growing like a tree/Doth make man wise or better be”. A.E. Housman, A Shropshire Lad and Other Poems, ed. Archie Burnett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 33 converts the simile to a metaphor when he speaks of the “tree of man”. In all these instances, however, the tree is figurative; in Hardy, as in Jerrold, it is as real as the man whose existence it prolongs.

between the original sense of the words and the sense imparted to them by the borrower that throws the latter's intention into relief.<sup>17</sup>

We are not obliged to suppose that Hardy was purposely alluding to Jerrold's essay. It is often the task, or the good luck, of a critic, to discover traces of forgotten reading in the works of a prolific and self-taught author. An unconscious reminiscence would at most be a clue to the genesis of the poem; if the echo is conscious, on the other hand, it is surely an invitation to contrast the innocent drummer with the bellicose mercenary of Jerrold's satire. Jerrold, most celebrated for his comic vignettes of urban domesticity, would not have lived comfortably in Hardy's Wessex; it must also be remembered that the two authors were contemplating Hodge in different circumstances. In war one blames the masters; in peace it is often the masters who deplore the warlike passions of the mob.

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<sup>17</sup> Cf. Ralph Pite, "Graver things ... braver things': Hardy's War Poetry", in Tim Kendall (ed.), The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 34-50 at 42 on the "rewriting" of "Drummer Hodge" in Rupert Brooke's 'The Soldier'. A.E. Housman's 'Astronomy' (1902), also a product of the Boer War, is elliptical where Hardy is simple, emotive where he is studiously impersonal. See further John Cartwright, 'Star-Defeated Sighs: Classical Cosmology and Astronomy in the Poetry of A. E. Housman', Journal of Literature and Science 3 (2010), 71-96 at 83-85.