

105/15

Monographs on the Life of Thomas Hardy : No. 11

Edited by J. STEVENS COX, F.S.A.

THOMAS HARDY PROPOSES TO MARY WAIGHT

by

Constance M. Oliver (Mary Waight's grand-daughter)

As told to J. Stevens Cox in September 1963

With an introduction by Richard Curle



Published by
J. STEVENS COX
at The Toucan Press
Beaminster, Dorset
1964

The realization that the few remaining persons who had known Thomas Hardy will soon have passed from the world faced the Editor with the imperative duty of recording their recollections of him before it was too late. He was in the fortunate position of knowing several who had not yet recorded their memories of Hardy and made it his business to encourage them to do so. The search for new evidence continues. Serious interest began when the Editor invited Mrs. Gertrude Bugler, then his neighbour at Beaminster, to give a talk on her recollections of Thomas Hardy at the Dorset Evening organized by the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society, in the Corn Exchange, Dorchester, 7th April, 1959. This she willingly agreed to give, and enchanted her audience. Her talk was published by the Society and met with considerable appreciation, even from as far afield as Japan and Peru.

It occurred to Stevens Cox that the Hardy recollections of N. J. Atkins, who played Alec D'Urberville with Gertrude Bugler as Tess in the original production of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* at Dorchester, November 26th, 1924, would also provide the Hardy student with a man's viewpoint by one who had been close to the master. *Hardy, Tess and Myself*, published December, 1962, by the Toucan Press, Beaminster, was the result, followed in the same week by *Tryphena and Thomas Hardy* by Lois Deacon. This was the first publication of the evidence of the secret betrothal in 1867 of Tryphena Sparks (The Dark Lady of the Lyrics) aged sixteen, and Thomas Hardy, aged twenty-seven.

The fourth of the series was *The Domestic Life of Thomas Hardy*, by Miss Ellen E. Titterington (Hardy's parlour-maid), and this gives us "the most intimate glimpses of his home life we shall ever have".

For other Monographs published and to be published see the list on the back cover.

Preliminary arrangements had been made to publish recollections of Hardy by H. O. Lock, solicitor, and D. A. J. Jackman, M.B.E., J.P., both of Dorchester, but their deaths in December, 1962, and January, 1963, before the arrangements could be completed, underlined the urgency of the task that had been undertaken.

Without enough facts it is impossible to present a rounded picture of any personality however simple, and Hardy's was complex. The varying view-points of the players in the Hardy life-scene check and counter-check each other and throw additional light on, especially, Hardy the man. These contributions by persons who knew him provide facts and impressions that will be of value to any future biographer.

The editor's catalytic task has been to loosen the memories of these writers and to encourage them, by varying means, to put down their recollections in writing for the benefit of posterity, and many were the difficulties that had to be resolved.



Mrs. Mary Oliver, (née Waight) aged between 65 and 70. This is how her grand-daughter, Winifred Oliver, remembers Mrs. Oliver when she was in her 70's. No photographs of Mrs. Oliver in her youth survive.

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INTRODUCTION

By RICHARD CURLE

It has always been a highlight of family history to Miss Constance Oliver and her relations that Thomas Hardy, in 1862, proposed to her grandmother, then Mary Waight, but was rejected. He was nearly twenty-two and she some seven years older. As she writes, "I first heard of it from my mother when I was still at school in the early 'twenties, but my elder sisters knew of it some years before I was told." The Waights lived in Dorchester and Mary worked in the "Mantle Showroom, the best business in the town." A few years after Hardy's proposal she married a man called Oliver and eventually died at the age of eighty-two.

Here is an interesting story, but as Mary Waight never apparently spoke of it in detail and as there is no reference to this one-sided romance, it cannot have caused more than a momentary flutter and would, like so many youthful, unfulfilled romances, have been forgotten long ago had not Hardy become famous. But just as people rather cherish a family skeleton in the cupboard, so do they rather cherish the slightest link with the celebrated, even if unhappy in its outcome, and thus this brief passion, which flared and faded a hundred years ago, takes its little place in the drama of Hardy's career.

Hardy, as we know, was susceptible to feminine charms, and as Mary, according to her grand-daughter, was "a nice-looking young woman with a rounded face, blue eyes, brown hair and a very fine skin and good complexion" it is not at all surprising that Hardy, in his youthful ardour, should have succumbed to her attraction. But it would be a great mistake to take the affair too seriously, although, apart from her physical allure, Mary remained an extremely gracious, unaffected woman of pronounced character right into old age. But whether a girl accepts a proposal or does not accept it is entirely her own affair, and Miss Oliver's sister, Mabel, had the obvious good sense to state that she assumed she had refused him "because she was not in love with him," adding that, to judge from his books, Hardy "was a genius and an introvert" while, according to her own memory, her grandmother was "very much the reverse." The first reason given swallows any others, but it is worth adding Miss Constance's astute remark that her grandmother was "always very generous in every way," and that this may have been crucial, as Hardy, "though kindly and compassionate," was, apparently, "not that way inclined." How true!

Miss Oliver's father knew Hardy and often went to Max Gate, but though some of the children accompanied him on occasion and walked about the garden there, Miss Constance Oliver appears never even to have seen him, and most of her references to the novelist are very bare. She is, of course, more communicative about her grandmother, whose only recorded words on Hardy were made on her death-bed when, hearing of his recent second marriage, she exclaimed, "Oh, he's married!" in a tone of satisfaction, as if to say, 'Oh, that's good, he is all right.' This may have been her intention, no doubt, but it seems a bit far-fetched to assume it, as it was more than fifty years since she had rejected his proposal.

There is really very little to say about this essay except that it adds one small and somewhat vague link, for no memorials such as letters and photographs—the only photograph has disappeared—survive, to that enormous chain which, piece by piece, builds up the sequence of Hardy's long life.

THOMAS HARDY PROPOSES TO MARY WAIGHT

By CONSTANCE M. OLIVER¹

(Mary Waight's grand-daughter)

My grandmother, one of a family of nine whose father was a printer and bookbinder, was born at Melksham in Wiltshire in 1833. Later, the family removed to Dorchester and she was working there when, in 1862, a young man whose name was Thomas Hardy fell in love with her and asked her to marry him, although he was considerably younger than she was, being scarcely twenty-two. She refused his offer and presently he went to London to work as an architect. Three years later, early in 1865, she married George Stroud Oliver² and I am one of her grandchildren. The marriage did not turn out happily, and her husband, unaccompanied by his wife, migrated to



1 West Walks, Dorchester, c. 1865. Home of Mary Waight for much of her married life. From the album of Mary Waight and now in the possession of Constance M. Oliver.

¹ Miss Constance Muriel Oliver, is a Civil Servant. (J.S.C.).

² Copy of marriage certificate in my possession (C.M.O.).



Thomas Hardy "at 21 years of age". Reproduced by kind permission of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society.

America.

It has always been known in our family that Thomas Hardy proposed to Mary Waight a few years before her marriage to another man, but though I, who was born in London in 1910, first heard of it from my mother when I was at school in the early 'twenties my older sisters knew of it some years before I was told.

My mother died in 1960. I still possess a letter written by her on April 15, 1951, in which she answers one from me asking for information about Hardy. Here is what she wrote: "Re Thomas Hardy, I think it quite likely that the quotation¹ refers to her, as I *know* he did propose to her while she was in business there (Dorchester) at the Mantle Showroom, the best business in the town, and she was eighty-two when she died about 1914 or so, and she did not marry *very* early in life. Re the photo of *him* (Hardy), I had it at one time but have no idea what happened to it, and am sorry about that. He must have been very much in love with her, but she herself never talked about him, except that one knew she did more or less admire him. It's no legend anyway."

Although my mother wrote, "she herself never talked about him", she meant that she never went into details about the matter.

As regards the photograph referred to in her letter, I think it must have got lost or destroyed during one of our many removals. It was signed.

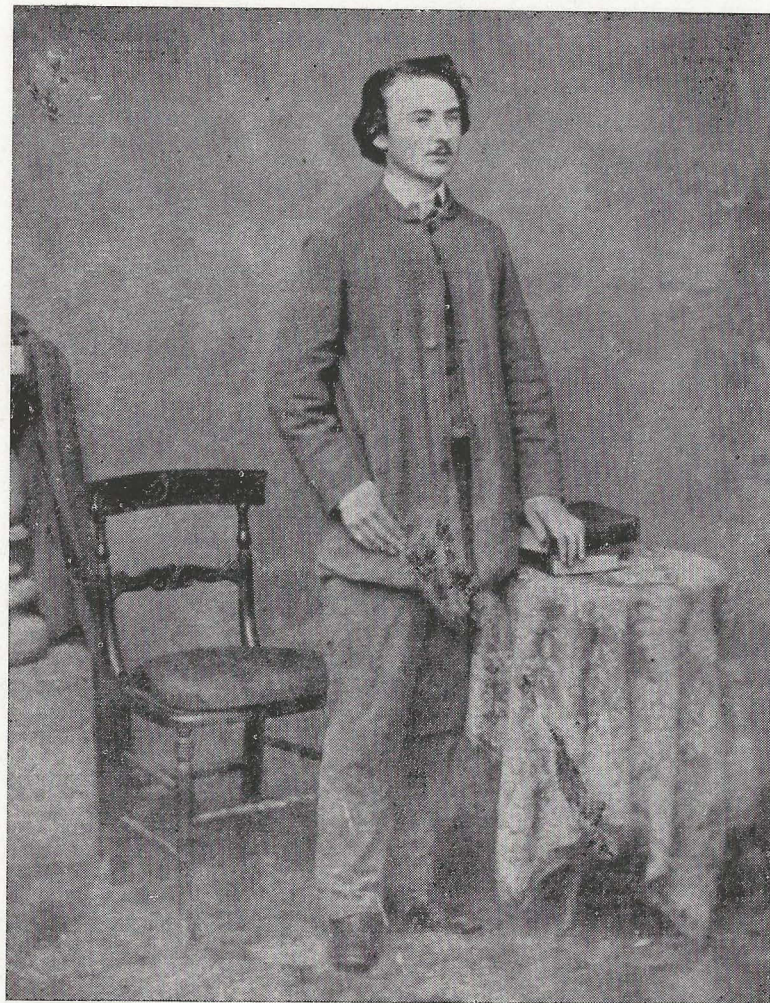
What was she like, this young woman of whom the youthful Hardy was enamoured? She was nice-looking, with a rounded face, blue eyes, brown hair and a very fine skin and good complexion. She was of short to medium height. She was kind and very generous and she loved beautiful things. She was a strong character, with very definite tastes, preferences and opinions. She was always well and neatly dressed in clothes of very good material. Her voice was low and quiet, deliberate and rather slow, a comforting voice. She was not a great conversationalist, but although she did not talk a lot, she chose her words so as to make her meaning quite clear. "She was very neat and moved gently," her grandchild, Winifred, wrote of her.

After her marriage to George Oliver the couple first lived in Trinity Street, Dorchester, but later at 1 West Walks, Dorchester. This house was full of treasures, beautiful china, glass and antique furniture. My eldest sister, Winifred Mary, remembers her very clearly and with great affection, and both she and another of my sisters, Mabel, vividly recall the feeling of ease and security in her well-ordered home.

Mary's husband died before her grandchildren entered the world. Their only child, a boy called George Charles Oliver, was born on December 21, 1865, and was brought up mostly by his mother alone. Eventually he married Alice Higgins of Shepton Mallet, Somerset, and they had seven children, of whom I am the youngest. My father was at one time Dispenser to the Head Surgeon at Bath Infirmary.

He knew Hardy and often went, usually of a Sunday morning, to Max Gate, Hardy's home on the outskirts of Dorchester, sometimes taking two or more of his little girls with him. There seemed to be an open invitation to Max Gate—"a lovely house, in a lovely setting" is how my sister, Mabel, remembers it—and she says, "I think Marjorie, another sister, and I were left to wander round the garden, while our father went in."

My sister calls to mind a visit to Max Gate, in which I accompanied



Thomas Hardy, aged about 17. Reproduced by kind permission of the Dorset Natural History and Archaeological Society.

Mabel and herself. We did not see Hardy and his wife, but we did see the biggest snowdrops we had ever seen, growing in the garden. I never did see Hardy, but Winnie caught sight of him once in Dorchester. One day during 1915 or earlier she had just walked through the Antelope Hotel's courtyard into South Street when she observed him entering a confectioner's shop and, knowing that he was a famous writer, waited a short while until he came out again. In a letter to me my sister Mabel wrote:

"I was very young when my grandmother died and my memory of her is slight. But I do remember that, when I was about three, there was a man staying in her house who had very white hair, and his appearance frightened me. Well, one day I met him on his own and ran through the house crying, "I'se frightened," repeating it over and over again until I got to my grandmother. I buried my head in her lap and I had an immediate feeling of safety".

Up to the time of her last illness my grandmother used to send us parcels of ginger nuts, jellies, coloured pictures for our scrap-books and Pears soap. She also sent us Dorset butter wrapped in a cabbage leaf to keep it cool. She was always very generous in every way. This may have been a reason why she refused to marry Thomas Hardy, who apparently was not that way inclined, although he was a kindly and compassionate man. Also she was seven years older than he was, and when one is young such a difference in the wrong way may mean a lot to a woman, especially if there are other things against it as well. And perhaps George Oliver came along just then and swept her off her feet.

Another extract from a letter to me from Mabel may be of interest here. She wrote, "I think she refused him because she was not in love with him. By his writings . . . he was a genius and an introvert and . . . by what I remember, she was very much the opposite."

During my grandmother's final illness in 1914, when she was so ill that those around her, including my mother and father, thought she was not capable of knowing what was going on, a newspaper happened to be lying on her bed which bore the news of Thomas Hardy's second marriage. To the astonishment of those present, she rallied sufficiently to read the announcement, for she breathed, "Oh, he's married!" in a tone of satisfaction, as if to say, "Oh, that's good, he is all right!"

The old lady died on January 13, 1915, though a younger sister lived on till 1939. Her death was thus recorded in the *Dorset County Chronicle*: Oliver-Jan. 13, at 1 West Walks, Dorchester, Mary, widow of Mr. G. Oliver, aged 82.

Flowers from the garden at Max Gate were laid on her grave by her beloved grandchild, Winifred, who went there of her own accord to gather some of those lovely snowdrops which grew almost wild amid the ivy. She made a posy of snowdrops and ivy leaves and placed it on her grandmother's grave.

It seemed fitting that flowers from her old sweetheart's garden should beautify her grave, especially as they were wild or semi-wild flowers and leaves, of which they were both so fond. It would have given her a gentle pleasure, and Thomas Hardy, too, I believe.

QUESTIONARY

On March 1, 1964 I interviewed Constance Oliver's sister, Mrs. Winifred Mary Turner (née Oliver) at her home near Newhaven. She was born at Bath, November 18, 1897 and as a child visited her grandmother at Dorchester for several weeks holiday yearly. She remembers seeing Hardy in a Dorchester shop and being taken by one of her grandmother's maid's for picnics on Maumbury and Poundbury and returning with flowers for her grandmother. (J.S.C.)

- Q. *How old were you when you first visited your grandmother at 1 West Walks, Dorchester?*
- A. I was 7 or 8 years of age and was put in charge of the guard and met at the station by a maid.
- Q. *When did your mother first tell you about the Hardy-Mary Waight episode?*
- A. I first heard when I was a young girl aged about 12.
- Q. *Did your grandmother ever talk to you about Hardy?*
- A. No. I was 64 years younger than her and she never talked to me about young men or marriage.
- Q. *Do you remember the photograph of Hardy that had once belonged to your grandmother?*
- A. I do; but it is many years since I last saw it.
- Q. *Did it have an inscription on it?*
- A. It did, but I cannot now remember exactly what it was. It was signed across the bottom right-hand corner with a mark such as affectionately, but I really cannot remember the exact words to be certain. I last saw the photo in a Bible at my mother's house in Furnley Road, South Norwood. That would have been in the 1920's. My mother had promised to let me have this photo of Hardy, but after her death I do not know what happened to it.
- Q. *Your sister said you put snowdrops on your grandmother's grave and that you picked them at Max Gate. Why did you do this?*
- A. When I was 17 my grandmother died, and as she had been so very fond of the snowdrop and knowing that Hardy had once been fond of her, I thought Max Gate was the most suitable place to gather them.
- Q. *What other memories have you of your visits to 1 West Walks?*
- A. I remember I always slept on the top floor near the maids. It was a great rambling house and grannie had paying guests. Two guests I remember were Major Barlow and his wife, They had come from India. I believe Major Barlow erected a marble horse trough in Dorchester.

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