

REVIEW

Thomas Hardy, *Wessex Heights: An Illustrated Selection*. Selected and edited by Neil Philip. London: Bloomsbury, 1988. 192 pp. ISBN 0-7475-0217-X.

Literary critics haven't always been kind to Thomas Hardy, but few writers have been more loved by their everyday passionate readers. *Wessex Heights* is a book for the lover of Hardy, or a sweet foretaste for the uninitiated, but it's not one for the student.

The collection comprises seven familiar set-pieces from the best-known novels (such as Sergeant Troy's sword-exercises, the selling of Susan Henchard and the baptism of Tess's dying baby, Sorrow), sixteen poems, two short stories and the essay 'The Dorsetshire Labourer'. These are interspersed with no fewer than 108 pictures, many of which are black-and-white illustrations from the *Cornhill* and the *Graphic* serials and portraits of the Great Man, but which include sumptuous colour reproductions of paintings such as Thomas Webster's *The Village Choir*, Fred Morgan's *The Rivals* and Sir Luke Filmer's *A Country Girl*. Rosy-cheeked milkmaids, strapping young swains: 'period peasants so pleasing to the metropolitan imagination', in T.S. Eliot's withering phrase. The skies are blue and gold when people work the fields, and folk are safe indoors when it snows. This is the kind of Wessex Mr Hardy's magazine editors wished he would imagine more often.

Of course this is a prettified Hardy, and it's fair to say the same of Neil Philips' selection of texts. All of the novel extracts come from early in their respective tales, before Hardy's relentless, machine-like fate closes in: no bloodstain on the ceiling, or hanging children here. The short stories turn the knife of irony, but it can't go deep in fifteen pages. Only twice among the illustrations — in weatherbeaten faces in an old photograph of the village band of Waltham-on-the-Wolds, and in a broadsheet describing an actual wife-sale at Bristol in 1823 — does the harshness and the grinding poverty of the other side of Hardy's world threaten to come through.

So it may not have much in the way of truth to it, but *Wessex Heights* is indeed a thing of beauty, both in its contents and in its presentation. And perhaps it can be said that in so celebrating Hardy's work, seeking out other artistic expressions of that Wessex of the mind Hardy could occasionally let himself describe, *Wessex Heights* does sometimes catch and convey more of what it is that has inspired a lasting love for Hardy's art in many of his readers than most of the critics have managed to do.