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GEORGE ELIOT’S DEBT TO HARDY?

By David McIntosh

In his biography of Thomas Hardy, Michael Millgate makes the following assertion:

The irritating association of Hardy’s work with George Eliot’s was kept alive in the summer of 1876 by the appearance of *Daniel Deronda* and the comment in the *Westminster Review* that it was fortunate that *The Hand of Ethelberta* had been published first, ‘or else ill-natured critics would have declared that his principal character was only a copy’. To such a criticism, had it in fact been made, Hardy might justifiably have pointed out that George Eliot had, in that same novel, borrowed from *Far From the Madding Crowd* the designation ‘Wessex’ for certain south-western portions of contemporary England. He could also have cited, in support of his own prior claim to that regional concept, the remarkable article entitled ‘The Wessex Labourer’ which appeared in the 15 July 1876 number of *The Examiner*.

Leaving aside the implausibility of George Eliot borrowing any ideas from Hardy, bearing in mind her dismissive attitude to novels published at that time (in August 1874 she mentions looking at three or four contemporary novels to see what the world was reading and finding the effect ‘paralysing’), Michael Millgate seems to base his assertion on the simple fact that *Far From the Madding Crowd* was written in 1874 while *Daniel Deronda* was not published in book form, as he correctly states, until the summer of 1876 (although serial publication had begun in February of that year). However, this considerably oversimplifies the situation. Hardy did indeed use the term ‘Wessex’ to designate a region of South West England in *Far From the Madding Crowd*, but only once, near the end of the novel in the first sentence of chapter 50 (‘Greenhill was the Nijni Novgorod of South Wessex’). It seems likely then that the idea of using ‘Wessex’ to describe a part of the country came to him while he was actually writing the concluding chapters of *Far From the Madding Crowd* in the summer of 1874.

Conversely, George Eliot used the term ‘Wessex’ seven times in the first nine chapters of *Daniel Deronda* (the first two of which deal with events in Germany), using it with increasing frequency, culminating in its use three times in chapter 9. At this point George Eliot decided to cease using the term. It is my belief that at this point George Eliot discovered that Hardy had used the term in *Far From the Madding Crowd* and, not wanting to be seen to have borrowed the idea, abandoned it.

Since we do not know exactly when George Eliot wrote chapters 3 – 9 of *Daniel Deronda*, it must surely be impossible to say whether it was Hardy or George Eliot who first had the idea of using ‘Wessex’. According to Frederick Karl, ‘by the time Deutsch died (12 May 1873) Eliot was moving along on Deronda’, concentrating on Gwendolen Harleth. Although this claim may be exaggerated, she had certainly made a start on the novel by the early summer of 1874 and had moved into a rented cottage at Earlswood Common with Lewes at the beginning of June, where she hoped ‘to get deep shafts sunk in my prose book’ (*Letters*, VI, 50). On 11 November 1874 she referred, in a letter to John Blackwood, to ‘the thick slice of manuscript...
which had passed into the irrevocable before we left Earlswood’ (Letters, IX, 138), and which had met with Lewes’s approval. They left Earlswood at the end of September 1874. By 13 January 1875 she had definitely completed the first fifteen chapters of the novel (Letters, VI, 116), so it is quite possible that ‘the thick slice of manuscript’ contained most of Book One and that she had written the first nine chapters by the time the serial instalment containing chapter 50 of Far From the Madding Crowd with the reference to ‘Wessex’ appeared in print in November 1874. She had, of course, certainly completed the first book well before ‘The Wessex Labourer’ appeared in July 1876, since it made up the first instalment of the serial publication of Daniel Deronda which began in February 1876.

Having decided not to use the term in the subsequent 61 chapters of Daniel Deronda, the logical thing for George Eliot to have done would have been to take the first opportunity to edit out the references in subsequent editions of the novel. This she decided not to do. In fact, I would suggest that she deliberately draws the reader’s attention to the fact that she has ceased using the term by not using it in the opening sentence of chapter 10, where it is noticeable by its absence. I can only imagine that George Eliot genuinely thought that using the term ‘Wessex’ in this way was her own invention and that she was loath to give up completely any claim to originating the idea, but felt uncomfortable about continuing with the term and exposing herself to the charge of having borrowed from Far from the Madding Crowd the designation ‘Wessex’.

The fact remains that two novelists seem almost simultaneously to have decided to resurrect an ancient place name to use in their novels. One possible conduit between Hardy and Eliot was the editor Leslie Stephen who was in contact with both novelists during this time. Perhaps this idea came up in conversation with one writer and was transmitted by Stephen to the other? Perhaps it was simply a coincidence? But that George Eliot borrowed the idea from Hardy seems to me the most unlikely explanation of all.

Notes