

# THOMAS HARDY'S WOMEN IN LIFE AND LITERATURE

## Peter Tait

Thomas Hardy was always fascinated by women. While in life his relationships were often fraught and unhappy, through the heroines of his novels we can see into his soul. These fictional characters, usually drawn in part or whole from women he knew, garnered our sympathy as they entered the difficult world into which Hardy cast them. In this respect, he was ahead of his time in challenging traditional attitudes to the plight of women in such questions as marriage, divorce, feminism, incest and lesbianism.

Throughout his life, Hardy nurtured close female friends, though at the expense of his two often neglected and humiliated, long-suffering wives. His mother, Jemima Hardy, exerted a possessive, domineering influence on young Thomas which would endure throughout his life. His relationship with his sisters and female confidantes, meanwhile, shows us how Hardy viewed women and what he expected from them.

This book assesses the influence of Hardy's closest female friends and family on his life and his work and looks at how his response to them moulded his creative genius. Hardy, it would seem, fell in love easily. A glance or a word from a pretty woman would merit a poem. Letters and photos would follow. But neither of his marriages was truly happy. Perhaps the only women he was destined to love without qualification were the ones he would create – *Tess*, above all.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

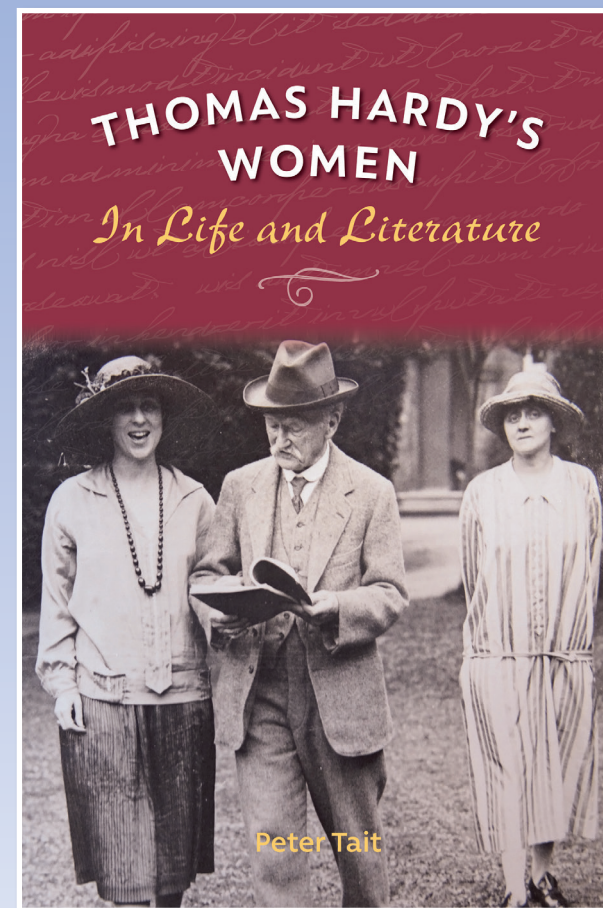
**Peter Tait** is a New Zealander who has lived in England for the past twenty years. A long-time aficionado of Thomas Hardy, his interest was rekindled when he came to live in Dorset in 1998. He has written several books, the most recent being novels based on the lives of Thomas Hardy's two wives, Emma (*Emma: A Woman Betrayed*) and Florence (*Florence: Mistress of Max Gate*) as well as contributing a preface to the autobiography of Littleton Powys. He has spent most of his life in education, as a teacher and headmaster and has written and spoken extensively on many educational issues in various magazines, websites, books and in the national press.

As an historian, Peter Tait has a keen interest in the history of Empire and of the Pacific, the subject of his next book, as well as environmental education as a trustee of Operation Future Hope which is dedicated to teaching children about ecology, re-wilding and climate change. He lives in Somerset with his wife Sarah, also a writer (*Heart of Resistance, The Bookshop Dragon*).

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[www.halsgrove.com](http://www.halsgrove.com) e-mail: [sales@halsgrove.com](mailto:sales@halsgrove.com)

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Left: Thomas Hardy's birthplace.



Emma, when young.



Older Emma.



Right: Thomas Hardy with a full beard in his mid thirties.



Florence and Thomas at Max Gate 1920 (after six years of marriage).

PART I: FAMILY

Chapter 1

Jemima Hardy

*"O my mother, my mother! should I not feel that I could be my life again, and make for you what you endured for me?"*  
The Return of the Native (1)

*"She was, without question, a remarkable woman. In addition to mastering the art of cooking the hardest something of grace and discernment, and became as well read as her mother. Early experience of adversity fortified the nervous she had inherited from her Swanton grandfather and the courage of his mother into a character of great power, so that throughout her life she was able to dominate her household, including her son Thomas—especially including her son Thomas—in almost every aspect of their lives."*  
Robert Spring (2)

It is fitting that any book on Hardy's women begins with Jemima, not only because she was the first woman in his life, but arguably, the most influential. For the first sixty-four years until her death in 1904, Hardy's mother exerted an unshakable influence upon him, no other woman came close to shaping his opinion. Her homestead philosophy and merchant views on marriage, on his relationships with women, (none of whom, it seemed, she approved of) and family were suffused with a deep and abiding pessimism that influenced his writing and left an indelible mark on Hardy that continued throughout his life.

At the age of thirty, Thomas jotted in his notebook that "Mother's mother (and she must—that a figure stands in our sun with arms uplifted, so broad as back from any pleasant prospect or shadow her possible." "O—'twould be dark and fatidic that if you were considerable way to explaining Hardy's pessimistic world-view. But what made her so and why was she so determined to ensure that the grim molten of life (if understandable from her own impoverished upbringing) should be visited upon the son whose intellect and ability she championed?"

Jemima Hardy was born in 1813 in Melbury Osmond, a small hamlet north-west of Dorchester. She was, as Hardy described her in "The Life" apparently a girl "of unusual ability and judgment, and an energy that might have carried her to successful issues," but that she suffered from the early loss of her father when she was nine as well as "some very stressful experiences of which she could never speak in her mature years without pain" noting that she had "suffered her troubles by making every both she could lay hands on." (4)

In this respect, she followed her own mother's example. Elizabeth (Betty) Swanton was a woman who was also reportedly intelligent and well-read, but whose own

prospects had been curtailed by marriage followed soon after with the birth of her first-born and then, in 1822, by the early death of her husband leaving her destitute with several children to bring up on her own.

It was this difficult and impoverished childhood that coloured Jemima's life and that of her children. She grew up quickly, helping her mother by taking on manual chores such as mangleing gloves and knitting to cook. We cannot be sure of her appearance as a young girl, but in photographs taken in later life, Jemima exhibits the strong physical features of her family, a firm jawline, aquiline nose and short stature. In this rather severe picture, Hardy added some extra detail of his own from his own memory, noting that his mother's hair was (almost) too clear and too open, bald. Like her own mother, Jemima was a voracious reader although there is little evidence that she could write anything more than her own name. Her quest to service, working first for The Honorable Reverend Charles Reddyck, an elderly uncle of the third Earl of Echester in Maiden Newton, brought her into a new and more exciting world than she had known and gave her a taste of life outside of the Dorset shires. She soon made herself so useful to her employer that she travelled with the family on their regular sojourns to Weymouth. When time permitted, she read widely, gaining an insight into a life markedly different to that she had known as a child. In 1836, after her employer's death, she joined the even more distinguished household of The Reverend Edward Murray, brother in law of the Earl of Echester, grandson of the Duke of Atholl and a renowned scholar and author, where she continued to read and absorb the atmosphere and mores of this very literary household. In 1837, the family took Jemima to London for the season, which made a lasting impression upon her, but soon after her employer took up a new appointment in London and this time, they left Jemima behind.

One consequence of Jemima's time at Stinard House was that she began to attend church in Stinard, where the Reverend Murray was the Minister. At some stage, she caught the eye of one of the church musicians, Thomas Hardy, a local builder from Upper Bockhampton. With her hopes of a life in London thwarted and her time in the employment of the Fox-Strangways ended, Jemima seemed to lose her way and, as had been the case with her own mother, before long she found herself at 26 years standing at the altar heavily pregnant alongside her handsome, but somewhat reluctant suitor.

With her own prospects undone both by marriage and the birth of Thomas, Jemima harboured even greater ambitions for her first-born when she recognized early on as being, unacceptably gifted. Perhaps to compensate for the fact that Thomas was an enterbald and weak baby who was slow to develop physically, Jemima lavished her considerable attention on developing his studies. She taught him to read the all accounts, he was reading by the age of three and passed on her great love of literature. Jemima guided his reading habitually and he learned to trust her judgement as well as her knowledge of local folk lore, superstitions and country ways that was later to be an omnipresent in many of his novels.

At the age of eight, having been well tutored by his mother, Thomas was deemed of an age to attend the recently opened village school in Lower Bockhampton that had been built by the Lady of the Manor, Julia Augusta Martin with encouragement from the Vicar of Stinard, Mr Bishop.

Example of a double-page spread.



Kate Hardy.



Mary Hardy.