The Uses of a Regional Past

Hardy’s involvement with the Napoleonic era was remarked upon by T. E. Lawrence as late as 1923: “Napoleon is a real man to him, and the county of Dorsetshire echoes that name everywhere in Hardy’s ears. He lives in his period, and thinks of it as the great war.” Such immersion came only with The Dynasts, and since the long evolution of that drama seems clearly to have begun prior to the composition of The Trumpet-Major—Early Life (140) preserves from 1875 an idea for a Napoleonic ballad-epic—it is tempting to regard the novel as no more than a preparatory foray, a minor by-product of the major work. But the success of The Trumpet-Major on its own terms and the position it occupies in the sequence of Hardy’s career give a quite independent interest to its handling of time and history, its exploratory probing of the Wessex past.

Hardy had a long-standing fascination with things military. As he told a friend at the time of the Boer War, he was utterly opposed to war, yet once it had begun no one was more easily caught up by martial enthusiasm. Dorchester’s role as a garrison town gave its life a particular colour and excitement which Edmund Gosse noted when visiting Hardy in the early 1880s, and it is precisely this quality, familiar to Hardy since childhood, which is captured in heightened form in the figure of Sergeant Troy. It was entirely characteristic both that Hardy should have introduced Troy’s sword-exercises into Far from the Madding Crowd and that he should have taken care to ensure the technical accuracy of his representation by consulting the standard army handbook on sword drills. Equally characteristic was Hardy’s
special enthusiasm for the Napoleonic era, which not only saw the bloodiest and most desperate foreign battles Britain had then known but brought to her own shores the imminent threat of invasion from across the Channel.

As Hardy explained in his Preface to *The Dynasts*, what gave a peculiar excitement to events in his own county of Dorset was the local expectation of a French landing combined with the consequences of George III's fondness for Weymouth:

It chanced that the writer was familiar with a part of England that lay within hail of the watering-place in which King George the Third had his favourite summer residence during the war with the first Napoléon, and where he was visited by ministers and others who bore the weight of English affairs on their more or less competent shoulders at that stressful time. Secondly, this district, being also near the coast which had echoed with rumours of invasion in their intensest form while the descent threatened, was formerly animated by memories and traditions of the desperate military preparations for that contingency. Thirdly, the same countryside happened to include the village which was the birthplace of Nelson's flag-captain at Trafalgar. (vii)

Dorset events of that period had already received occasional, humorous treatment in the poems of William Barnes. His "Nanny Gill", for example, describes a military review on the downs behind Weymouth, one of many mounted during the early years of the century to gratify the King's delight in such performances:

Ah! they wer times, when Nanny Gill
Went so'jerën agëanst her will,
Back when the King come down to view
His ho'se an' voot, in red an' blue,
    An' they did march in rows,
    An' wheel in lines an' bows,
    Below the King's own nose;
    An' guns did pwoint, an' swords did gleäre,
A-fightën foes that werden there.\(^5\)

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