hardy and englishness

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‘All Englishmen they’, said the old man.
(The Trumpet-Major, chapter I)

The opening chapter of The Trumpet-Major touches upon the subject of national identity. An old man, Simon Burden, is drawn from the local pub to observe the manoeuvres of troops upon the downs. The pub is named ‘The Duke of York’; there is a curious sense of continuity in this environment, as soldiers are marched up and down hills before military action. Simon was a soldier ‘many years ago’ and he carries the ‘burden’ of history as he struggles to explain military practice to the novel’s female protagonist, Anne Garland. He recognises the regiment they are watching:

‘Tis the York Hussars,’ said Simon Burden, brightening like a dying ember fanned. ‘Foreigners to a man, and enrolled long since my time. But as good hearty comrades, they say, as you’ll find in the King’s service.’

Observing the arrival of a Dragoons regiment, Burden makes the comment quoted at the beginning of this chapter, drawing a distinction, therefore, between ‘Englishmen’ and ‘Foreigners’ serving in the British Army (irrespective of the laudable ‘hearty’-ness of the latter). The Duke of York’s folkloric world reflects a type of continuity and yet the world has changed irrevocably. The battles of the Napoleonic era are the last in a long sequence of conflicts that helped form a sense of national identity, but a new era is dawning in which understanding of complex international political affiliations is necessary. This is the key
shift in national consciousness depicted in Hardy's writing. It becomes too much for Simon Burden, representative of the 'dying ember' of old-fashioned Englishness.

It is only in recent years that critical strategies have been developed to investigate the complex political challenges presented in Hardy's work. In exploring his treatment of ideas of national identity, in particular, we need to remain sensitive to the cultural context(s) in which he wrote. Several recent studies have examined these, including *The Idea of Englishness 1880–1920*, edited by Robert Colls and Philip Dodd, which surveys cultural manifestations of Englishness across a range of types of expression, political, linguistic, literary and musical.\(^1\) Passing reference is made to Hardy in this work, and this is helpful, especially when supplemented by reference to David Gervais's more recent *Literary Englands: Versions of Englishness in Modern Writing*, which concentrates primarily on the way in which a sense of national nostalgia permeates the work of Hardy's twentieth-century literary successors.\(^2\)

More focused on Hardy is Peter Widdowson's *Hardy in History: A Study in Literary Sociology*, which analyses the way his obvious involvement with Englishness functions both in terms of his role as author-creator and as a subsequent 'cultural construct', as ideas of Hardy's work, of 'Wessex' and of the author himself, are developed for different ideological projects. The history of 'Hardy and Englishness', in this sense, will continue to develop, as new editorial projects, biography, critical reinterpretation, school and university syllabi, and other cultural adaptations and appropriations, appear. A bipartite process for readers should be the result: a process of return to texts, criticism and biography for reinterpretation within specific social and cultural contexts, combined with ongoing analysis of new Hardyan cultural products. The problem that has faced Hardy studies in this connection to date is that 'Hardy's work is variously dehistoricized and simultaneously rehistoricized in the ideological discourses of the present.' Widdowson summarises one tendency of Hardy studies, at least until the late 1980s, as 'the crucial displacement of history by pastoral – a crux in the ideology of any national culture'.\(^3\) Often Hardy's work has been treated selectively and in a ideologically conservative fashion; it has been filed away under headings such as 'Victorian Pastoral', partly as a result of Hardy's own classification in 1912 of his most popular Wessex fiction under the label of 'Novels of Character and Environment'. Widdowson's suggestion is that Hardy's radical approach to questions of form in the fiction (improbabilism versus literary realism) and