

The imaginative response to archaeology in late nineteenth  
and early twentieth century literature

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There are a number of writers of the latter part of the nineteenth century who use archaeological features as a serious literary device. They show a marked departure from the Gothic tradition of the previous century, for their concern was not solely the creation of atmospheric effect: instead, they attempt to incorporate the spirit of the past within a depiction of the changing fabric of English society. The recurrent sentiment is that of a search for the spirit of England, a spirit which will resist the destructive effects of increasing mechanisation, and which can only be found in a landscape with memories. I should like to consider some of these writers, and the varying ways in which they respond to the sense of antiquity, and use it in a way which will comment on life in the present.

The nineteenth century was a time of tremendous spiritual confusion: traditional certainties had been undermined by the theory of evolution, by developments in Geology and the Natural Sciences, and by Higher Criticism of the Bible. Victorians were stretching forth Tennyson's "lame hands of faith" and finding that there was nothing there. A sense of spiritual crisis is reflected in the writing of many of the major Victorian writers, but it is nowhere more acute than in the work of William Hale White (or 'Mark Rutherford'). His Autobiography of Mark Rutherford is a classic description of the suffering undergone at this time. Hale White saw life as a spiritual dream, and loss of faith a denial of the value of life itself. Unlike the other novelists in this paper, he professed to preferring the facts of archaeology to the "indefinite, vague, misty sentiment" they inspired. He says after visiting Stonehenge:<sup>1</sup>

... this I try as much as possible to avoid. It is bad for anybody; treble bad for me, and I would acquire some distinct piece of information about Stonehenge than be a victim of the shapeless emotion which almost overpowers me as I look at it.

This event is in turn recounted in the novel Miriam's Schooling (1890), in which the heroine visits Stonehenge after a severe illness (the result of spiritual collapse):<sup>2</sup>

She had been told as much as is known about that mysterious monument, - that it had been built ages before record, and that not only were the names of the builders forgotten, but their purpose in building it was forgotten too. She was oppressed with a sense of her own nothingness and the nothingness of man. If those who raised that temple had so utterly passed away, for how long would the memory of her existence last? Stonehenge itself too would pass.

Stonehenge is not described at all. It is merely the object which

inspires Miriam's change of heart, and she resolves in future to think of others rather than the self-absorbed life she has led up to this time. The monument marks the insignificance of a single life, but plays no further part in the novel. In this respect, Hale White differs from those novelists and journalists seeing archaeological features as an intrinsic part of the landscape.

Within this tradition are a group of rather problematic 'nature writers': problematic for the critic in that it is difficult to place them within any distinct category. The standard of their writing fluctuates wildly, and they show great versatility, writing novels, short stories and articles for the many newspapers and journals which flourished at that time. Richard Jefferies is perhaps the best known: he struggled to make a living out of freelance journalism in almost every field until his death from tuberculosis at the age of thirty-nine. He was a native of Wiltshire, and developed a strong interest in archaeology in his childhood. Some of his writing is specifically archaeological, dealing with such matters as the identification of ancient field systems, the supply of water to hilltop forts and the reconstruction of early environments. However, his attempts to "glance back into the unwritten past"<sup>3</sup> are very amateurish, partly as a result of his need to maintain his readership, but largely because he was not particularly interested in facts. The central theme of Jefferies' writing was always that of the primacy of Nature, and of the natural in Man. He inherited the Idealist form of Pantheism of Emerson and the New England transcendentalists, and this sort of writing presents further problems of assessment. His spiritual autobiography, The Story of My Heart (1883), is seen by his followers (for Jefferies became something of a cult figure) as his greatest work, whereas for others it is nothing but vapid nonsense. I tend to fall into the latter group, although the book does contain some marvellous writing. There is a long passage considering the question of the immortality of the spirit (it is scarcely the soul), inspired by reflection upon the tumuli of the downs:<sup>4</sup>

There were grass-grown tumuli on the hills of old I used to walk, sit down at the foot of one of them, and think. Some warrior had been interred there in the ante-historic times. The sun of the summer morning shone on the dome of the sward, and the air came softly up from the wheat below, the tips of the grasses swayed as it passed sighing faintly, it ceased, and the bees hummed by to the thyme and bluebells ... I felt at that moment that I was like the spirit of the man whose body was interred in the tumulus; I could understand and feel his existence the same as my own ... As my thought could slip back the twenty centuries in a moment to the forest-days when he hurled the spear, or shot the bow, hunting the deer, and could return again as swiftly to this moment, so his spirit could endure from then till now, and the time was nothing.

This shows Jefferies' ability to capture the intensity and atmosphere of a particular moment. The vivid sense of place and of physical sensation is coupled with the attempt to grasp the significance of the passage of time, and of death itself. The contrast of life and death is striking,

especially if one considers that it is the work of a man mortally stricken with tuberculosis.

In some of his early work, however, Jefferies uses the traditionally Gothic effect of archaeological monuments, as in the short story "Henrique Beaumont" (1886). The 'ruthless ruffian' of the piece, Austin Rowlands, is about to fake an attempted rape on the virtuous heroine, Ellen:<sup>5</sup>

... the pony paced slowly through a strange collection of stones by the roadside, a circle of uprights, with a huge monolith, like an altar stone in the midst. It was as wild and weird as the night itself, and as inscrutable. Druidical or not, from time immemorial had those stones been there, and although grey and venerable with age, were shunned as though the abode of evil spirits.

He shows some scepticism at the origins of the Druids' Stones, but the scene itself is reminiscent of the Gothic novel, as is the whole story. His fiction in its entirety is poor, and it is the short and lyrical pieces depicting both the natural world and rural conditions at which Jefferies excels. As far as the response to archaeology is concerned, it is when he uses an archaeological discovery -- for instance, the discovery of the Roman skeleton in "A Roman Brook" -- to reflect upon past and present as a continuum, that he is most successful.

In a similar vein, the work of W.H. Hudson contains many striking descriptions of the English countryside, and he furthers the attempt to capture the 'spirit of England'. Brought up in South America, Hudson yearned for open spaces in which he could feel at home. He developed a love for Wiltshire:<sup>6</sup>

From how much of England has this expression which nature has for the spirit, which is so much more to us than beauty of scenery, been blotted out! This quiet spot in Wiltshire has been inhabited from of old, how far back in time the barrows raised by an ancient barbarous people are there to tell us, and to show us how long it is possible for the race of men, in all stages of culture, to exist on the earth without spoiling it.

Hudson believes that this feeling for the past must come from the spirit of place alone, for he says of an excavation at Old Sarum:<sup>7</sup>

But it will no longer be the place it was, the Society of Antiquaries having received permission from the Dean and Chapter of Salisbury to work their sweet will on the site. That ancient, beautiful carcass, which had long made their mouths water, on which they have fallen like a pack of hungry hyenas to tear off the old hide of green turf and burrow down to open the light or drag out the deep, stony framework ... What person who has known it and has often sought that spot for the sake of its ancient associations ... will not deplore this fatal amiability of the authorities, this weak desire to please every one and inability to say no to such a proposal!

His article on "Stonehenge" (in Afoot in England) shows not the



slightest interest in its history: Hudson, like Jefferies and Hardy, and Lawrence later, felt himself akin to the spirit of the remote past, and it was this that he wished to see revered in the present.

There was a great revival of nostalgia for a bygone rural England in the early twentieth century. This often results in the false Edwardian antithesis of the countryside versus suburbia, and gives the predominantly wistful tone to writing of the time. Hudson, E.M. Forster and Edward Thomas propagated this myth of England as a golden rural world where true feeling might still be found. Edward Thomas was, however, a very fine writer. He was another of the 'nature writers', trying his hand at almost every kind of writing, although his greatest gift was for poetry -- and this is reflected in his prose works, particularly The South Country. He too had a considerable interest in Archaeology and Natural History, and was familiar with the history of Antiquarianism, as he recounts in The Icknield Way (1913). Thomas attempts to combine scholarly research into the history of the Icknield Way with an account of the wildlife and people of the area, and he tries to analyse the mystery the past holds for the present.<sup>8</sup>

Few in the multitude of us who now handle maps are without some vague awe at the Old English lettering of the names of ancient things, such as Merry Maidens, Idlebush Barrow, Crugian Ladies, or the plain Carn, Long Barrow, or Dolmen. Not many could explain altogether why these are impressive. We remember the same lettering in old mysterious books, and in Scott's *Marmion* and Wordsworth's *Hartleap Well*. We are touched in our sense of unmeasured antiquity, we acknowledge the honour and the darkness of the human inheritance.

Thomas mixes fact with imaginative speculation and sheer fancy, using evocative language to conjure the mystery and atmosphere of antiquity.<sup>9</sup>

They belong to the twilight of the world. No doubt the sun shines no brighter at noon than it did then on a perfectly wild earth, on flowers that were never gathered, on bright plumage that no man had coveted. But all the forest and marsh of primeval earth form in the imagination mists to which the lack of history adds yet another veil. These mists lie over the world, to my mind, exactly as the white mist of summer lies, turning into a sea most of what once was land and making islands of the woods on the steep, uncultivated tracts. The islands rising out of the mists of time are hills and mountains, and along their ridges ran the first roads, and by them are the squares and circles of the first habitations and the mounds of the first solemnized graves ...

Landscape and the attitude towards it has always been an important aspect of the novel tradition. The novel as a form is ideal for social comment, depicting as it does the interaction between personal and social relations. The land is generally taken as a metaphor for human values, and throughout the nineteenth century we see the pervasive image of a landscape inscribed with social truths: for instance, the plot in Wuthering Heights revolves around the use and ownership of land, and *Nature and Society* are seen as identical in the works of George Eliot. It is with the works of Thomas Hardy that we find the need for a

landscape with memories:<sup>10</sup>

... They are old associations - an almost exhaustive biographical or historical acquaintance with every object, animate and inanimate, within the observer's horizon. He must know all about those invisible ones of the days gone by, whose feet have traversed the fields which look so grey from his windows; recall whose creaking plough has turned these sods from time to time ... The spot may have beauty, grandeur, salubrity, convenience; but if it lack memories it will ultimately pall upon him who settles there.

This is from The Woodlanders, the most elegiac of Hardy's works, but his best novels deal with the changing ways of life in rural 'Wessex'. His belief in the association of past memories can be seen in his diaries:<sup>11</sup>

September 28 (1877): An object or mark raised or made by man on a scene is worth ten times any such formed by unconscious Nature. Hence clouds, mists and mountains are unimportant beside the wear on a threshold, or the print of a hand.

This is written after a night spent rambling around the earthworks of Hambledon Hill, for Hardy was keenly aware of the atmosphere of ancient monuments. There is an interesting short story, "A Tryst at an Ancient Earthwork" (in the volume A Changed Man), which recounts an illicit plundering of 'Mai-Dun' (Maiden Castle) by an eminent antiquarian. The story takes place at dead of night during a fierce storm, and most of the narrative is taken up with the dramatic effects of the storm.

Hardy was friendly with General Pitt Rivers, and formed part of Edward Clodd's Aldeburgh symposia. He wrote articles on the Maumbury Rings, on an excavation at his house at Max Gate in Dorset, and he was interviewed by the Daily Chronicle in 1889, when it seemed that Stonehenge itself was about to be sold. When asked what should be done about this, Hardy replied:<sup>12</sup>

I assume that in all events Stonehenge must remain the wonder of Salisbury Plain, and of England, which it has been for so many centuries - a sacred possession ... Suppose, for argument's sake - nothing more - that you carry the stones to America and re-erect them there. What happens? They lose all interest, because they would not form Stonehenge; and the same with the Stonehenge which was left. The relics being gone the association of the place would be broken, all the sentiments would have evaporated. Altogether, it would be as if King Solomon had cut the child in two, leaving no child at all.

He discusses the fascination of the "gaunt nakedness" of its situation, the effect of moonlight upon the structure, and his hesitation concerning the question of an excavation to settle the question of the origin of the monument. "This, if done at all, should be carried out under the strictest supervision. Personally I confess to a liking for the state of dim conjecture in which we stand with respect to history".<sup>13</sup> Hardy exercises his imagination when using archaeological features with varying degrees of artistic success. There is a scene in The Trumpet Major, in which various rustic characters are assembled on

Rainbarrow beacon at night, and: "They listened with parted lips, the night blowing through Simon Burden's few teeth as through the ruins of Stonehenge".<sup>14</sup> This sort of bathos is rare, however, and the famous scene in Tess of the D'Urbervilles (1891) shows Hardy using Stonehenge to great effect.<sup>15</sup>

The band of silver paleness along the east horizon made even the distant parts of the Great Plain appear dark and near; and the whole enormous landscape bore that impress of reserve, taciturnity, and hesitation which is usual just before day. The eastward pillars and their architraves stood up blackly against the light, and the great flame-shaped Sun-stone beyond them; and the Stone of Sacrifice midway. Presently the night wind died out, and the quivering little pools in the cup-like hollows of the stones lay still.

Hardy returns to the mythic view of Stonehenge, for Tess and Angel Clare discuss the function of this "heathen temple" -- with some rather heavy-handed symbolism, as Tess falls asleep on the altar-stone, shortly before her arrest and execution. She is sacrificed to the double standards of Victorian morality, and -- more importantly -- the forces of social change in rural England. Clare is a victim of the 'ache of modernism', and Hardy succeeded in capturing precisely the malaise of the turn of the century.<sup>16</sup>

To recline on a stump of thorn in the central valley of Egdon, between afternoon and night, as now, where the eye could reach nothing of the world outside the summits and shoulders of heathlands ... and to know that everything around and underneath had been from prehistoric times as unaltered as the stars overhead gave ballast to the mind adrift on change, and harassed by the irrespressible New.

The idea of something remaining unchanged from prehistoric times holds a great fascination for the imagination, as we see in The Return of the Native.<sup>17</sup>

It was as if these men and boys had suddenly dived into past ages, and fetched therefrom an hour and deed which had before been familiar with this spot. The ashes of the original British pyre which blazed from that summit lay fresh and undisturbed in the barrow beneath their tread. The flames from the funeral piles long ago kindled there had shone down upon the lowlands as these were shining now ... Indeed, it is pretty well known that such blazes as this the heathmen were now enjoying are rather the lineal descendants from jumbled Druidical rites and Saxon ceremonies than the invention of popular feeling about Gunpowder plot ... All was unstable; quivering as leaves, evanescent as lightening.

Egdon Heath is generally seen as the central character of the novel, although Hardy tries to make Eustacia Vye as much a part of it as the large barrow which forms the "pole and axis of this heathery world". She is first seen on top of the barrow, where "the first instinct of an imaginative stranger might have been to suppose it the person of one of the Celts who built the barrow, so far had all modern date withdrawn from the scene. It seemed a sort of last man among them, musing for a



moment before dropping into night with the rest of the race".<sup>18</sup>

The reference to Celts is rather typical of novelists of this time. Other writers of the Victorian and Edwardian eras were to use this Celt/Saxon polarisation as a means of characterisation -- the Saxons being seen as mechanical and dull, whereas the Celts were artistic and full of vitality. These ideas stem in part from Matthew Arnold's On the Study of Celtic Literature (1867), with his sympathetic description of the Celtic temperament. This is not a factual account, for Arnold was interested in the imaginative contrast of English and Celtic poetry, seeing in it a weapon against the 'Philistinism' of his own day. A contemporary was to criticise him for treading "the quaking bogs of Celtic archaeology",<sup>19</sup> but it was the significance of the poetry that Arnold was investigating, and not the facts of its origins.

The idea of this contrast was furthered by Edwardian novelists such as John Galsworthy, and more notably, E.M. Forster. Both The Longest Journey and Howards End, the novels set in England and dealing with specifically English themes, contain a strong sense of time and of place, and they are informed by the love of the English countryside and the values traditionally held within it. Forster tries to link the land with its past; and the descriptions of the landscape with its relics of past represents an attempt to find a continuing and enduring spirit which will withstand the rapid encroachment of suburbia. Forster speaks of the "ugly cataracts of brick" which spread out of Salisbury:<sup>20</sup>

But instead of looking towards the cathedral, as all the city should, they look at a pagan entrenchment, as the city should not. They neglect the poise of the earth, and the sentiments she has decreed. They are the modern spirit.

In The Longest Journey, Forster uses attitudes to the distant past as a touchstone for character. These early novels are very much 'thesis' novels and fail to carry the ideas which Forster is (rather simplistically) putting forward; but his use of the past is of some interest. The major female character, Agnes Pembroke, shows her insensitivity to the spirit of the past when she speaks of it in terms of flint arrowheads in a museum and when she gets some earrings: "little gold knobs, copied, the jeweller told them, from something prehistoric".<sup>21</sup> Agnes is totally blind to the life of the spirit, which Forster as a Humanist felt to be the most important facet of life. Forster's own attitude to the past he evokes is rather vague. He uses the earthworks of the Cadbury Rings (actually the Figsbury Rings near Salisbury, which Forster visited frequently), the tumuli of the Six Hills, and various manifestations of the reality of England's past, suggesting the mysterious forces they can have on those characters receptive to their influence, but he does not clarify the qualities these peoples are supposed to have possessed.

Forster's novels call for an 'English mythology' to give a sense of continuity; to connect the life of the present with the values of the past: "Why has not England a great mythology ? ... Deep and true as the

native imagination can be, it seems to have failed here".<sup>22</sup> His message is too overtly made, as in the rhetorical passages where Rickie contemplates "the springs of creation" and hears "the primeval monotony", and the long section concluding:

Here is the heart of our island: the Chilterns, the North Downs, the South Downs radiate hence. The fibres of England unite in Wiltshire, and did we condescend to worship her, here we should erect our national shrine.

The novels are not an artistic success. The mysteries of England's past as represented by ancient earthworks and burial mounds give a far more subtle sense of the wholeness of time than that which can be achieved by rhetorical outbursts.

D.H. Lawrence is generally seen as the culmination of the 'nature tradition'. His complex and intricate theories of civilisation and the corruption of the modern consciousness led him to search for a mythic unconscious -- to search for a race which had not had its vitality dimmed by the deadening forces of mechanisation. Hence his fascination with the Etruscan peoples, the Celts, the ancient races of Central America, and the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico. His attempt to mythologise New Mexico fails through his need to place too great a symbolism on a land he did not understand. It is when he speaks of England, when he understands the social processes at work and the interaction of Man and the land, that he has his greatest success. The Rainbow presents a very fine analysis of changing rural life over successive generations, and the change in consciousness which accompanies it. Lawrence's description always operates on a symbolic level, and it is thus that he uses archaeological features.<sup>24</sup>

The dawn came. They stood together on a high place, an earthwork of the stone-age men, watching for the light. It came over the land. But the land was dark. She watched a pale rim on the sky, away against the darkened land ... A little wind was running in from the sea behind. It seemed to be running to the pale rift of dawn. And she and he darkly, on an outpost of the darkness, stood watching for the dawn ... He too realized what England would be in a few hours' time -- a blind, sordid, strenuous activity, all for nothing, fuming with dirty smoke and running trains and groping in the bowels of the earth, all for nothing. A ghastliness came over him.

The literary use made of archaeological features can be seen to chart the historical consciousness of an age; for it is the imaginative response to the past which shows how an age sees itself. Although aware of many of the facts of archaeology available at the time, most of these writers chose to ignore them and to respond through the imagination. Whether escaping into a nostalgic sense of a lost golden age, or attempting to fight the complexities of the present, all these writers used visible antiquities as an artistic device. Archaeological features were in this way incorporated into the realist tradition as a natural part of the landscape. The search for a land with historical associations marked the loss of confidence in the spirit of social



change and an increasing resistance to the implications of the modern age. Quite what the implications of this might be for our understanding of the development of Archaeology as a discipline in the early 20th century are, of course, unclear; but we cannot ignore such evidence. Indeed, our understanding of the history of the subject will not be complete until it incorporates some explanation of changes in the wider imaginative response to the past.

### Notes

1. Letter to Mr & Mrs Colenutt, quoted in W. Stone The Religion and art of William Hale White, p. 148. A.M.S. Press Inc., New York, 1967.
2. W. Hale White, Miriam's Schooling, p. 117. Oxford University Press, London, 1936.
3. R. Jefferies, Wild Life in a Southern County, p. 22. Smith & Elder, London, 1889.
4. R. Jefferies, The Story of my Heart, p. 48. Quartet, London, 1979.
5. R. Jefferies, The Early Fiction of Richard Jefferies, p. 56. Arthur Young, Well, 1886.
6. "Winterbourne Chase" in A Shepherd's Life, p. 44. Methuen, London, 1910.
7. "Salisbury as I see it", ibid., p. 22.
8. E. Thomas, The Icknield Way, p. 32. Constable & Co., London, 1913.
9. Ibid., p. 8.
10. T. Hardy, The Woodlanders, p. 172. Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1981.
11. F.E. Hardy, The Life of Thomas Hardy, vol. I, p. 153. Macmillan, London, 1933.
12. H. Orel, Thomas Hardy: Personal Writings, p. 196. Macmillan, London, 1967.
13. Ibid., p. 198.
14. T. Hardy, The Trumpet Major, p. 222. Macmillan, London, 1974.
15. T. Hardy, Tess of the D'Urbervilles, p. 447. Macmillan, London, 1974.
16. T. Hardy, The Return of the Native, p. 36. Macmillan, London, 1974.
17. T. Hardy, ibid., pp. 44-5.
18. T. Hardy, ibid., p. 41.
19. See introduction by Lord Strangford to Matthew Arnold's On the Study of Celtic Literature. Everyman, London, 1976.
20. E.M. Forster, The Longest Journey, p. 269. Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1978.
21. E.M. Forster, ibid., p. 13.
22. E.M. Forster, ibid., p. 262.
23. E.M. Forster, ibid., p. 132.
24. D.H. Lawrence, The Rainbow, p. 465. Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1978.