

## AGNES MILLER PARKER AND THE LIMITED EDITIONS CLUB'S *JUDE THE OBSCURE*

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'Actions must have their consequences; ill-judged actions must have uncomfortable results'.<sup>1</sup> Kitto's sober observation on the strain of tragedy which runs through *The Iliad* is a fitting epitaph for Hardy's last novel, the critical reception of which has been well documented. Whether or not the progress of Hardy's bleak and uncompromising tale affected the artist who was commissioned to illustrate the serial parts for its original appearance in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* is unclear. What is apparent, however, is that William Hatherell produced twelve unremarkable pictures of which the last, 'Jude at the Mile-Stone', moved Hardy sufficiently to congratulate him on his characterization.<sup>2</sup> Purdy tells us that Hardy thought well enough of these to frame and hang them at Max Gate.<sup>3</sup> We also know that Hardy considered Helen Allingham, who provided the drawings for *Far from the madding crowd*, to be the best illustrator he ever had.<sup>4</sup> Unlike Dickens, it would seem that in matters of pictorial representation, Hardy was easily pleased.

Recently, Trevor Johnson has provided a checklist of illustrated editions of Hardy's works which draws attention to the activities of George Macy, who issued five of the major novels through his book clubs.<sup>5</sup> Because book club editions are printed solely for subscribers, it is scarcely likely that an illustrated edition of *Jude the Obscure*, published in New York twenty-five years ago, was widely discussed at the time of its appearance. With the passage of time, however, very large quantities of book club volumes pass into general circulation and, inevitably, some copies of the Limited Editions Club's *Jude* have found their way into this country, partly through individual subscription but mainly through importation by specialist

<sup>1</sup> H.D.F. Kitto, *The Greeks*, revd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1957), 60.

<sup>2</sup> T. Hardy, Letter to W. Hatherell dated 10 Nov 1895. See *The collected letters of Thomas Hardy*, edited by R.L. Purdy and M. Millgate (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980–82), vol. 2, 94.

<sup>3</sup> R.L. Purdy, *Thomas Hardy: a bibliographical study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), 88.

<sup>4</sup> T. Hardy, Letter to Edmund Gosse dated 25 July 1906. See *Collected letters of Thomas Hardy*, vol 3, 218.

<sup>5</sup> T. Johnson, 'Illustrated versions of Hardy's Works', in *The Thomas Hardy Journal*, 9 (3), Oct. 1993, 32–46.



**Figure 1**

'Jude at the Mile-Stone'

(From *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Nov. 1895, p. 897)

secondhand bookdealers. From time to time, these copies surface in the major book auctions and booksellers' catalogues and end up in the hands of librarians or private collectors. As 1995 marks the centenary of the first publication of *Jude*, it seems appropriate to draw the attention of the author's admirers, not only to an interestingly illustrated edition of Hardy's story, but to a volume which the present writer believes to be one of the most outstanding examples of twentieth-century book design. Many of the editions issued to its members by the Limited Editions Club are too lavish, too full of illustration and just too big for British eyes. *Jude*, however, is a different proposition. It is a book designed to perfection.

Book clubs and printing societies existed in profusion in the nineteenth century, their general purpose being to publish or to bring back into print works which would not be commercially viable. The concept of book clubs which publish unlimited editions and exist to make profits for their proprietors, however, is more recent. In the United States both the Book-of-the-Month Club and the Literary Guild were founded in 1926 and gained immediate popularity. Among the many book clubs existing in Britain today, the Folio Society is well known for its enterprise in issuing the novels and short stories of Thomas Hardy in eighteen handsome volumes, with wood engraved illustration by Peter Reddick. For those who like their novels illustrated, clearly printed on good paper and decently bound, such book clubs perform a useful function.

The Limited Editions Club of New York, whose first books appeared in 1929, was conceived by George Macy as a vehicle for selling lavishly illustrated and well printed editions of the classics to fifteen hundred members each paying an annual subscription. Although, in all probability, he could have extended that membership easily, it is claimed that he refrained from this because he judged that quality would decline with longer print runs. An added factor was that the well-publicized exclusivity of its membership had some marketing value. One of his more romantic ideas was to have his books illustrated by artists from the country of origin of the texts.<sup>6</sup> In the case of the United Kingdom, such titles were often printed and designed here. Macy admired the books designed by Francis Meynell at the Nonesuch Press in London and followed his example in using such excellent printing houses as the Curwen Press and the great university presses at Oxford and Cambridge.

A striking example was the *Elegy written in a country churchyard*, by Thomas Gray, which was designed and printed at

<sup>6</sup> *Quarto-millenary: the first 250 publications and the first 25 years* (New York: Limited Editions Club, 1959), xiii.

the Raven Press, Alpertons, Middlesex, with wood-engraved illustrations by the Scottish-born artist, Agnes Miller Parker. Macy, a shrewd businessman, reissued this title, together with many others from the list of the Limited Editions Club, under the imprint of the Heritage Press, a less exclusive book club. By this device he was able to extend his profit. Heritage Press books were reproduced from electros and less expensively furnished in terms of paper and binding and, in many cases, had longer print runs.

Agnes Miller Parker came to prominence as an illustrator of fine books as a result of her husband, William McCance, being appointed controller of the Gregynog Press at Newtown, Montgomeryshire. By 1930, the Press was devoted, in the main, to the production of fine, limited editions. Working under immense difficulties caused largely by the capriciousness of the Misses Gwendoline and Margaret Davies, the philanthropic proprietors, William and Agnes produced *The fables of Esope and XXI Welsh gypsy folk-tales*.<sup>7</sup> These are now acknowledged as masterpieces of private press printing.

But it was through her association with the publisher Victor Gollancz that Agnes Miller Parker became generally well known. Gollancz had the vision to see that the countryside writings of H.E. Bates, generously illustrated with the spectacular wood engravings of Parker and carefully marketed, could attract great interest. *Through the woods*, published in 1936, exceeded all expectations and this was quickly followed by *Down the river*, an equally profitable venture. Both titles went into reprint and can be found today without much difficulty. In trying to reach the heights achieved by such private presses as the Gregynog Press and the Golden Cockerel Press, where a craft standard of the highest order was the goal, commercial printers were prone to over-ink wood engraved illustration, often with disastrous results. Agnes was happy with her work for Gollancz but Clare Leighton, another formidable illustrator, was less fortunate with *Four hedges*, a book in similar form published by Gollancz in 1935. Leighton, who worked in darker vein than Parker, enjoyed better fortune with her wood engravings for Macmillan's *Under the greenwood tree* which was published to mark the centenary of Hardy's birth.

The Gollancz books of Leighton and Parker brought wood engraved illustration before a wider public, at the same time enhancing their reputations and it is unsurprising that, in such circumstances, Macy called further upon Parker's services. In 1940 she received an invitation to prepare wood engravings for a Heritage Press edition of *The return of the native*.<sup>8</sup> The reason why Macy

<sup>7</sup> D. Harrop, *History of the Gregynog Press* (Pinner: Private Libraries Association, 1980), 99.

<sup>8</sup> A.M. Parker, Letter to Philip Gibbons dated 1 Oct. 1940. National Art Library, Victoria and Albert Museum, Box MS. L26 1963.

decided to issue the book in cheaper format rather than pursue his usual practice is not known, but he might have sensed that it would not be possible for the United States to avoid the consequences of the outbreak of the Second World War,

Initially, Agnes Miller Parker had serious doubts about undertaking the illustration of a Hardy novel, not least because she did not want to upset Clare Leighton. Writing frankly about her work to Philip Gibbons, a patron with whom she corresponded for over forty years, she was aware that 'Hardy writes so well that illustrators to me seem superfluous'.<sup>9</sup> *The return of the native*, which appeared in 1942, was indifferently printed and much of the fine detail of Parker's wood engravings was lost. She was deeply disappointed at the poor quality of the book and it seemed unlikely that her relationship with Macy would continue. However, in 1955 Parker was asked to provide the illustrations to an ambitious edition of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Well-printed and prettily bound, this book was sufficiently well received to trigger further Hardy projects.

Compared with her later Hardy illustrations, the wood engravings to *The return of the native* are fairly basic, broadly drawn and have limited tonal values. It is probable that she came to Hardy without any preconceptions, save that of being conscious of his highly descriptive prose. Macy encouraged her to visit Egdon Heath (*sic*) so that, on the spot, she could make a series of wood engravings which would 'serve as a landscape-overture to the drama'.<sup>10</sup> This curious instruction is perhaps best explored through Hodnett's classification of illustration as representational, interpretative or decorative.<sup>11</sup> The last of these is the least meaningful form of image making. Despite claiming that these wood engravings were of unsurpassed excellence, it would appear that the publisher visualized them as something separate from, rather than integrated into the text. The large, full-page illustrations lack the intimacy which can be gained from the use of vignettes. Furthermore, in some instances the major characters appear to be dressed in a manner more appropriate to an elegant London address than the open air of Wessex. Those readers familiar with Peter Reddick's raw and powerful cuts will undoubtedly find Parker's interpretation of the 'heath' and its characters to be somewhat bland in comparison.

Agnes was able to avoid this pitfall in designing the illustrations for *Tess*. In 1955 her relationship with her husband rapidly deteriorated and the marriage was virtually at an end. Since leaving

<sup>9</sup> A.M. Parker, Letter to Gibbons dated 21 Feb. 1941. National Art Library, V. & A. Museum, Box MS L26 1963.

<sup>10</sup> *The Heritage Club Sandglass*, 1942, No. 5LX, 3.

<sup>11</sup> E. Hodnett, *Image and text* (London: Scolar Press, 1982), 13.

Gregynog, McCance had not had much success with his own art. The relationship had been strained for some considerable time and, in these circumstances, it is unsurprising that her empathy with Tess comes through into her illustration. Purists may question the apparent lack of dust and dirt in her vision of rural Dorset, but for many admirers of her work, Parker's wood engravings greatly enhance the text. From a design viewpoint, the book is flawed, due to the insertion of six double-page wood engravings, coloured by linocut, which sit uneasily within the text. The device gave the artist the opportunity to portray broad sweeps of the Wessex landscape. 'Blackmore Vale', 'Cranborne Chase' and 'The Plain of the Great Dairies' are excellent prints but nevertheless an intrusion. *Tess* was printed in New York by the George Grady Company and published in 1956, the year in which George Macy died. By this time the McCances had separated and Agnes moved to Glasgow.

Macy's resourceful widow, Helen, took over direction of the Club. An early decision was to continue with the publication of Hardy's novels and John Dreyfus, the eminent British designer, was invited to undertake the task, at the same time becoming European consultant to the Macy enterprises. Dreyfus, who up to this time had designed five titles for Macy, had first met Agnes in 1957 when they came together to work on *Far from the madding crowd* for the Limited Editions Club and one of three volumes of Shakespeare's plays to be issued through the Heritage Press. From this time they were in constant correspondence.<sup>12</sup>

Agnes had provided George Macy with wood engraved motifs to use as repeat designs on the cloth bindings of *The return of the native* and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and this practice was again followed. By the end of January of the following year, Dreyfus was able to write and offer his congratulations on the design which she had engraved to be used on the paper-covered boards of *Far from the madding crowd*.<sup>13</sup> But, before embarking on her designs, Agnes had paid a visit to Puddletown as she had fallen under Hardy's spell. By this time, Parker had total control over the medium and was not only able to liberate light from the block but also radiate it in a manner seldom seen elsewhere. In *Far from the madding crowd*, that virtuosity reached its peak. There is an exquisite vignette on the title-page based upon Waterston Manor ('Weatherbury Upper Farm') and a tailpiece to the contents page of a shepherd and his flock. The first of the full-page wood engravings is that of the motionless 'girl on the summit of the load', a triumph of complex design, beautifully executed. The reader is intended to see her as the

<sup>12</sup> I. Rogerson and J. Dreyfus, *Agnes Miller Parker* (Wakefield: Fleece Press, 1990). 46.

<sup>13</sup> J. Dreyfus, Letter to Agnes Miller Parker dated 31 Jan. 1958. National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, Agnes Miller Parker Archive, File 295.

vision which Oak beheld when the 'ornamental spring wagon' came to a halt. The following illustration is also an example of what Hodnett terms the artist's 'moment of choice'. Here Bathsheba comes, 'the pail in one hand, hanging against her knee. The left arm was extended as a balance'. These scenes of activity, such as the rick-fire, sheep-dipping and shearing, are generally more successful than the characterization. The encounter of Bathsheba and Troy reveals nothing of their characters and has far less dramatic effect than the poorly drawn and engraved picture of the sword drill produced by Helen Allingham (née Paterson) for *The Cornhill Magazine* of 1874. However, the portrayals of Oak and Boldwood are more convincing. As in *The return of the native*, nocturnal scenes such as the rick-fire, a confrontation between Boldwood and Troy at the inn window attracted the attention of the artist.

The wood engravings were printed separately in order to obtain best results. Special pulls of some of the twenty-one full-page illustrations were printed on Japanese paper and presented along with the volume. Dreyfus chose Monotype Goudy Modern for the text and this proved to be both readable and an adequate weight for the wood engravings.<sup>14</sup> The paper for the binding and slipcase was printed in mauve. The quarter-tan sheepskin, blocked in gold, made one of the most attractive of the Limited Edition's Club bindings. Sadly, sheepskin as a binding material lacks durability and today few copies are seen in original condition.

A further three years passed before Agnes received a letter from Helen Macy asking the question 'What about doing *The Mayor of Casterbridge*'. After a substantial period of time devoted to painting, she could reply that she was 'now fresh again and would love to'.<sup>15</sup> The matter of Hardy's pictorial perception has been fully explored by Bullen and needs no further amplification here, save to suggest that, more than any other of his novels, the book throws up a multiplicity of images that lend themselves to graphic illustration.<sup>16</sup> No doubt any modern illustrator of distinction would have accepted such a proposal with alacrity. Nevertheless, as Agnes had realized when working on *The return of the native*, a huge difficulty faces the illustrator of a writer who effortlessly sustains powerful visual imagery.

Agnes had faced this when providing wood engravings for Harrap's 1940 edition of Housman's *A Shropshire lad* and also for five volumes of the essays of Richard Jefferies published between

<sup>14</sup> *Monthly Letter of the Limited Editions Club*, May 1958, No. 294, 4.

<sup>15</sup> H. Macy, Letter to Agnes Miller Parker dated 15 Feb. 1962 and draft reply, 21 Feb. 1962. National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, Agnes Miller Parker Archive, File 295.

<sup>16</sup> J.B. Bullen, *The expressive eye: fiction and perception in the work of Thomas Hardy*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

1946 and 1948. In reviewing the first appearance of *A Shropshire lad* in 1896, Richard Le Gallienne described the volume as 'poems combining to paint a picture'.<sup>17</sup> Samuel Looker, who edited the Jefferies volumes for the Lutterworth Press, felt that reading Jefferies's essays 'always quickens my sense of wonder and appreciation of visible beauty'.<sup>18</sup> Such comments unconsciously underline this problem. Millgate has highlighted the particular difficulties created by Hardy in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* as 'the basic physical layout of Casterbridge is carefull described and ... individual buildings are carefully fitted into place'. That Hardy's purpose was to 'evoke the precise nature of its social and economic life' did not ease the task of the illustrator.<sup>19</sup> The Limited Editions Club offered her the sum of £750 to illustrate this title and, for this modest remuneration, she worked long hours for almost a full year.<sup>20</sup> When published in 1964, the book contained sixteen full-page illustrations, eleven smaller wood engravings, including a fine portrait of Hardy based on Eric Kennington's statue, and sixteen engravings into which could be inserted initial letters of type metal. Some were cut in Glasgow, the remainder on the Isle of Arran, where she had moved to be with family.

It is likely that Agnes paid another visit to Dorset at this stage. There are nine sketchbooks with notes and detailed drawings of buildings, animals and landscapes for *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. The young Henchard is visualized as a fine figure, swarthy and unsmiling whilst the preliminary drawing of Farfrae show a contrasting character, ruddy and of fair countenance.<sup>21</sup> Dreyfus had the text set in Caledonia, first used unremarkably in *The return of the native*, but here printed impeccably at the Thistle press of New York under his direct supervision. The Club claimed that the paper was specially made in order 'to do the fullest possible justice to Agnes Miller Parker's exquisites'.<sup>22</sup> On seeing the illustrations, Dreyfus immediately congratulated her on pulling off a hat-trick,<sup>23</sup> and lost no time in telling Helen Macy of 'the beauty and relevance of the tailpieces' and that he was 'stunned by their beauty and brilliance'.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>17</sup> R. Le Gallienne, Review in *The Star*, 11 May 1896.

<sup>18</sup> S.J. Looker in *The spring of the year and other nature essays*, by Richard Jefferies (London: Lutterworth Press, 1946) 9.

<sup>19</sup> M. Millgate, *Thomas Hardy: his career as a novelist* (London: Bodley Head, 1971), 222.

<sup>20</sup> Memorandum of agreement between the Limited Editions Club and Agnes Miller Parker, 7 Aug. 1962. National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, Agnes Miller Parker Archive, File 295.

<sup>21</sup> Agnes Miller Parker Archive, Box No 2.

<sup>22</sup> *Monthly Letter of the Limited Editions Club*, Jan. 1964, No. 360, 3.

<sup>23</sup> J. Dreyfus, Letter to Agnes Miller Parker dated 23 July 1962, Agnes Miller Parker Archive, File 295.

<sup>24</sup> J. Dreyfus, Letter to Helen Macy dated 26 Sept. 1962, copy to Agnes Miller Parker. Agnes Miller Parker Archive, File 295.



The unsuccessful experiment with colour in *Tess* did not encourage further experiments in that direction until Parker's last and possibly most challenging commission. The publication of *Jude the Obscure* by the Limited Editions Club of New York was a fitting tribute to her life's work and the end of an era in the history of wood engraved illustration. From her relatively poor start in *The return of the native*, each successive novel showed a growing awareness of Hardy's art and a consequent elevation of her own. However, the illustration of the classic novel is a contentious affair and there are those who feel that the more recent illustrations of Peter Reddick get closer to the characters. Nevertheless, Parker's illustration of *Jude* was a major factor in the production of one of the most handsome examples of twentieth-century book design.

In returning to colour, Parker took an entirely different direction from that used in *Tess*. The introductory page to each part of the novel has a vignette in colour. Each is an outstanding example of craftsmanship allied to fine imagery. A gentle prospect of Marygreen Church provides a suitable introduction to the text. The cathedral at Melchester and Jude surveying the distant prospect of Christminster are perhaps less successful than the remainder, which include Shaston (Shaftesbury's Gold Hill) and a most delightful engraving of Christ Church (Tom Tower at night). Following previous practice, Dreyfus insisted that the wood engravings were printed separately from the text. In the case of the two-colour engravings for the part title-pages, there were three different colour schemes requiring five separate impressions.

In respect of characterization, Parker had no difficulty in interpreting the nature of the young Arabella. Unlike Hatherell's preference for the three girls kneeling on the bank of the brook, Parker chose the encounter on the bridge, contrasting the awkward figure of Jude with Hardy's 'complete and substantial female animal', confidently posed against the rail to show herself off to best advantage. As the story progresses, she depicts the rapidly maturing Arabella in the aggressive act of tossing Jude's books on the kitchen floor, then as the over-ripe, coarse barmaid, captured in the tavern mirror and finally as the frowsy Mrs Cartlett, rising from her bed to greet Sue.

Initially, the illustrator has less success with Jude, perched on the barn roof and gazing at the 'topaz points' of Christminster. The illustration of Jude, the Biblioll College reject, remorseful on Sue Bridehead's doorstep after his drinking bout, is a good example of her moment of choice and the conversation at the window in Shaston conveys the fatal attachment between the pair. But it is at the mile-stone where Jude's condition is conveyed in all its torment, not by facial expression but by the agony of the body bent forward, a terminally-sick man struggling 'in the teeth of the north-west wind'. Seated in the cathedral, Phillotson's own despair is shown in

facial expression and demeanour, this repeated where he has gathered Sue in his arms after her fall.

For the text, Dreyfus again chose Caledonia, designed for Mergenthaler Linotype by W A Dwiggin and incorporating the best features of Wilson's Scotch Roman and Bulmer's Martin types and which Dwiggin described as having 'something of a simple hard-working feet-on-the-ground quality'.<sup>25</sup> The typesetting was carried out with great care by the John Stone Company. *Jude* was printed by Joseph Blumenthal, doyen of America's printers, whose insistence on high standards had brought the Spiral Press international recognition.

The use of Linotype was frowned upon by many authorities who believed that the process was adequate only for magazine and newspaper work. At the Spiral Press, however, Joseph Blumenthal's pressmen could use slugs of metal to better effect than the majority of those printers who preferred to set individual characters of type from the Monotype caster. The combination of fine typesetting and perfect inking has resulted in a perfect weighting between text and illustration and, in contrast to the inclusion of coloured illustration in *Tess*, the colour wood engravings in *Jude* are not intrusive, being printed as vignettes on the text paper. This, specially produced for the book by Curtis of Newark, Delaware, was appropriately light but totally opaque.

For the binding, Dreyfus specified crushed morocco of the highest quality. This was dyed to 'a deep green-black', with the 'streaks and stains' of the grey paper used to cover both boards and slipcase reflecting 'the weathered stones of Wessex'.<sup>26</sup> Macy's publicity machine was never short of adjectives. Perhaps, in 1942, they were premature in stating that 'it may not be true that Mrs McCance is the finest wood engraver in the world today, but there are dozens of perfectly competent authorities who say she is'.<sup>27</sup> With the publication of *Jude*, however, few would doubt that proposition. She died in 1982, leaving behind a legacy of exciting illustration that was always executed to the highest level of professionalism and it is our good fortune that it encompassed the major novels of Hardy. Her objective, quite simply, was 'to take a literary approach to her illustration giving prime consideration to the reader, making a comment on a momentary situation or a crystallisation of the mood'.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> W.A. Dwiggin and H. Puterschein, *Caledonia: a new printing type* (Brooklyn: New York, Mergenthaler Linotype Co., 1939).

<sup>26</sup> *Monthly Letter of the Limited Editions Club*, Aug. 1969, No. 425, 4.

<sup>27</sup> *The Heritage Press Sandglass*, 1942, No. 5LX, 2.

<sup>28</sup> A.M. Parker, *A note on the illustrations in tragedies of William Shakespeare* (New York: Heritage Press, 1959), xxii.

*Jude the Obscure*, with an introduction by John Bayley and wood engravings by Agnes Miller Parker was published by Limited Editions Club of New York in 1969. Its current asking price is from £100 to £200, according to condition. Copies can be seen in the National Library of Scotland, the Bodleian Library, Dorset County Library at Dorchester and at the Manchester Metropolitan University Library. Reprints issued under the Heritage Press and Heritage Club imprints are not uncommon but, in these instances, the wood engraved illustrations, reproduced from electros, have lost some of their brilliance.



**Figure 2**

'Jude at the Mile-Stone'

(From *Jude the Obscure*, Limited Editions Club, 1969, p. 409.

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