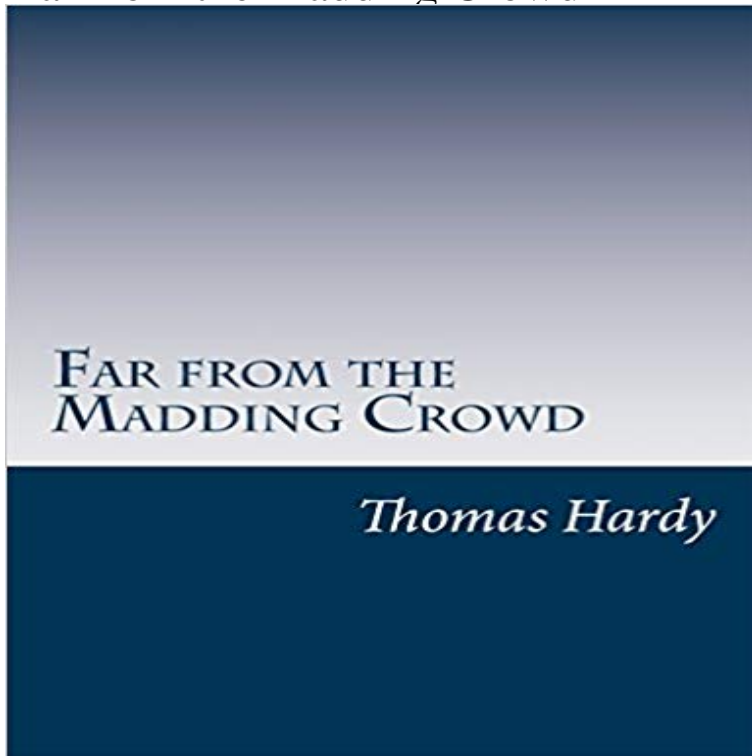


Far from the Madding Crowd



In reprinting this story for a new edition I am reminded that it was in the chapters of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, as they appeared month by month in a popular magazine, that I first ventured to adopt the word *Wessex* from the pages of early English history, and give it a fictitious significance as the existing name of the district once included in that extinct kingdom. The series of novels I projected being mainly of the kind called local, they seemed to require a territorial definition of some sort to lend unity to their scene. Finding that the area of a single county did not afford a canvas large enough for this purpose, and that there were objections to an invented name, I disinterred the old one. The press and the public were kind enough to welcome the fanciful plan, and willingly joined me in the anachronism of imagining a *Wessex* population living under Queen Victoria; a modern *Wessex* of railways, the penny post, mowing and reaping machines, union workhouses, lucifer matches, labourers who could read and write, and National school children. But I believe I am correct in stating that, until the existence of this contemporaneous *Wessex* was announced in the present story, in 1874, it had never been heard of, and that the expression, a *Wessex* peasant, or a *Wessex* custom, would theretofore have been taken to refer to nothing later in date than the Norman Conquest. I did not anticipate that this application of the word to a modern use would extend outside the chapters of my own chronicles. But the name was soon taken up elsewhere as a local designation. The first to do so was the now defunct *Examiner*, which, in the impression bearing date July 15, 1876, entitled one of its articles *The Wessex Labourer*, the article turning out to be no dissertation on farming during the Heptarchy, but on the modern peasant of the south-west counties, and his presentation in these stories. Since then the

appellation which I had thought to reserve to the horizons and landscapes of a merely realistic dream-country, has become more and more popular as a practical definition; and the dream-country has, by degrees, solidified into a utilitarian region which people can go to, take a house in, and write to the papers from. But I ask all good and gentle readers to be so kind as to forget this, and to refuse steadfastly to believe that there are any inhabitants of a Victorian Wessex outside the pages of this and the companion volumes in which they were first discovered.

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