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Ignoble Strife: *Far From the Madding Crowd* and the Agricultural Labourers Strike of 1874

Describing the hermeneutic possibilities offered by serialisation, Wolfgang Iser maintains that 'the reader is forced by the pauses imposed on him to imagine more than he could have done if his reading were continuous . . . because it introduces gaps by means of a break until the next instalment.'[1] Applying Iser's observation to the Victorian serial, Mark Turner describes the way that the 'enforced pauses or gaps between instalments' opened up, for the contemporary reader, a dynamic in which new meanings were made. 'What did it mean,' he asks, 'to read an instalment in a magazine, with other kinds of material published alongside it – did this influence the interpretation of the fiction?'[2] Linda Hughes and Michael Lund similarly observe that we should see serial fiction 'taking place amid many different texts and voices.' Readers' responses to fiction took place simultaneously with their interpretation of current events, they argue, and the way they picked up a serial novel was similar to the way in which they interpreted the latest news.[3] Victorians themselves seem to have reflected on this very dynamic. Innes Shand, writing in 1879, described the relationship between the monthly press and contemporary events in which monthlies 'sit as judge on the more hasty opinions of the of the daily and weekly press' and 'treat current literature as current news.'[4]

I am grateful to a number of individuals with whom I have discussed this argument over the years. When it was first conceived, Michael Millgate was an inspirational sparring partner. More recently Fred Reid, who himself had come to some of the same conclusions, provided generous encouragement.

[1] Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1989), pp. 11-12.
[2] Mark Turner, 'Telling of my weekly doings', *A Companion to the Victorian Novel*, ed. Francis O. Gorman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 113-133 (p. 114).
[3] Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund, *The Victorian Serial* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991), p. 11.
[4] Innes Shand, 'Contemporary Literature, VII. Readers', *Blackwood's Magazine*, 126 (August 1879), 235–56.

In the light of all of these observations, the following pages show how, in its serial circulation, one Victorian novel might be seen to have made 'current literature . . . current news'.

Far From the Madding Crowd appeared in *The Cornhill Magazine* in twelve monthly instalments between January and December 1874. By the 1870s the *Cornhill* had established itself as the market leader, offering for the mid-Victorian reader the latest work by the most prestigious names in fiction alongside seriously-minded articles on current affairs, travel, religion, and science. Since its launch in 1859, the magazine's success had owed much to the care with which its editorial policy had been pursued since its founding editor, William Makepeace Thackeray, promised that contributors would be chosen for their 'good manners, good education, and . . . good English.' Further assured that its aim was not 'to pull down the existing order of things, and, in a word, to set the Thames on fire', readers could rest easy in the knowledge that they would find on none of its pages the slightest whiff of radicalism. In standards of morality, too, its subscribers were promised nothing short of edifying content, behaving as if there were 'ladies and children always present'.[5] As Peter Keating observes, 'serious' monthlies like the *Cornhill* were characterized by 'a determination to establish between themselves and their readers common principles and standards on the major political, moral, religious, and cultural issues of the day'.[6] By the time that Hardy's story began appearing in the following decade, the *Cornhill* had done little to depart from its stated aims.

At the very time of the serial's first appearance, concern had recently been mounting in the conservative and liberal press for the future of the farming industry. Founded in 1872

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[5] William Makepeace Thackeray, 'To "A Contributor"', *Selected Letters of William Makepeace Thackeray*, edited by Edgar F. Harden (London: Palgrave, 1996), p. 345.
[6] Peter Keating, *The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel, 1875-1914* (Fontana, 1991), p. 35

under the leadership of Joseph Arch, the National Agricultural Labourers Union (NALU) had been organised to advocate for improvements in working conditions and educational provision for the labouring poor. Throughout that year and since, the NALU had supported a series of local strikes with varying degrees of success. By the time that the first part of Hardy's novel appeared in the *Cornhill*, the Union was known to have in excess of 86,000 members, many of them living in and around Hardy's home village. In February 1874, a month into the publication of the serial, a new wave of disputes between farmers and labourers began, resulting, by summer, in a full-scale national strike. By midsummer, 1874, with 6,000 men and their families drawing strike pay, the associated farmers compacted to hit back. In consequence, many NALU members found themselves locked out, their families evicted by farmers who were determined to hold out against the Union and its demands.[7] Throughout the following months, as *Far From the Madding Crowd* was appearing in the *Cornhill*, readers were encountering daily reports in the national press about union rallies all over the country, rioting and the destruction of property, and witnessing angry exchanges in the press. As I hope to show, several of the novel's episodes as they appeared would have profound political resonance for readers who, as the serial was unfolding, found themselves in the midst of a turbulent political crisis that came to be known as the 'Revolt of the Field'.

Hardy's biographer, Michael Millgate, observes that the novelist probably chose the setting of *Far From the Madding Crowd* in the 1840s, 'with a deliberate eye to its remoteness from the current unrest.' Hardy, who was 'anxious throughout his career to avoid the slightest suggestion of political involvement', argues Millgate, had found in Puddletown, the original

[7] For a detailed account of the dispute of 1874, see Jo Draper, 'Never-to-be-forgotten acts of oppression . . . by professing Christians in the year 1874': Joseph Arch's Agricultural Labourers' Union in Dorset, 1872-4', *The Agricultural History Review*, 53: 1 (2005), pp. 41-77.

for the novel's Weatherbury, 'a village where unionism had not yet become an issue.' [8] This is questionable: only two miles from the village that had been famous for the agricultural labour riots that resulted in the conviction of the Tolpuddle Martyrs in 1834;by the time that the novel was appearing in *The Cornhill* Puddletown had once again become an important focus for union activity: by April most of the farm-hands in and around the village had withdrawn their labour, and a number of well-publicised evictions followed.[9] Throughout 1873 and 1874, Hardy must have been inundated with news about the local unrest on a daily basis. He had himself attended a public meeting of the NALU at which Arch spoke, probably at Dorchester in January 1873, a full seven months before he began writing *Far From the Madding Crowd*. Milborne St Andrew, only seven miles from his home in Bockhampton, and only three miles from Puddletown itself, had by then become a centre for union activity. In the year of the novel's serialisation, George Heath remarked that 'The agricultural labourers of Dorsetshire have long had the reputation of being the most wretched of all the labouring classes of England', going on to describe the situation in Puddletown itself as one of 'extreme wretchedness.'[10]

February 1874: 'A good man and a bad servant'

Such was the state of affairs in Hardy's Dorset when readers were opening their *Cornhill*s to read the second number, describing Oak's attempt to rescue his employer's harvest from fire:

> Gabriel lept over the hedge, and saw that he was not alone. The first man he came to was running about in a great hurry, as if his thoughts were several yards in advance of his body, which they could never drag on fast enough.

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[8] Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy: His Career as a Novelist* (New York: St Martin's, 1994), pp. 100, 102.
[9] See Draper, 'Never-to-be-forgotten,' pp. 61ff.
[10] George Heath, *The English Peasantry* (London: Warne, 1874), p. 25

> “O, man—fire! A good master and a bad servant is fire fire!—I mane a bad servant and a good master: O Mark Clark come! And you Billy Smallbury—and you Mary-Anne Money—and you, Joseph Poorgrass, and Matthew there, for his mercy endureth forever!” Other figures now appeared behind this shouting man and among the smoke, and Gabriel found that, far from being alone, he was in a great company—whose shadows danced merrily up and down, timed by the jigging of the flames, and not at all by their owners’ movements. The assemblage—belonging to that class of society which casts its thoughts into the form of feeling, and its feelings into the form of commotion—set to work with a remarkable confusion of purpose. (*CM,* 29: 134)

As an image of passionate volatility, fire had long held political resonance and at the height of the scene it is linked directly to employment relations in the axiomatic idiom about ‘a good master and a bad servant’. Amid all the confusion and chaos, the overwhelming emphasis of the passage as it unfolds is on cooperation, as we are given a roll-call of labourers as they are mustered:

> “Get a tarpaulin—quick!” said Gabriel.
>
> A rick-cloth was brought, and they hung it like a curtain across the channel. The flames immediately ceased to go under the bottom of the corn-stack, and stood up vertical.
>
> “Stand here with a bucket of water and keep the cloth wet,” said Gabriel again.
>
> The flames, now driven upwards, began to attack the angles of the huge roof covering the wheat stack.
>
> “A ladder!” cried Gabriel . . . .
>
> Billy Smallbury—one of the men who had been on the waggon—by this time had found a ladder, which Mark Clark ascended, holding on beside Oak upon the thatch. The smoke at this corner was stifling, and Clark, a nimble fellow, having been handed a bucket of water, bathed Oak’s face and sprinkled him generally, whilst Gabriel, with a long beech-bough in one hand and his crook in the other, kept beating the stack and dislodging all fiery particles. (*CM*: 29: 134-5)

While Oak emerges as the hero of the hour, the support of the ‘assemblage’, working together for the good of the farm, is the keynote. To read February’s fire episode as a parable of a social world in which masters and men live in harmony with one another for the greater corporate good is not to imply that in 1874 Hardy was seeking deliberately to teach his

countrymen lessons about classless cooperation in the midst of political crisis; at very least, it raises questions about the ideological effects of fiction at times of incendiary unrest.

Despite the co-operative attempts of Oak and his worthy company, newspapers were reporting on inflammatory forces at work that would be more difficult to extinguish. Even beyond the symbolic suggestion of uncontrolled passion, harvest fires held for many in the nineteenth century a profound political meaning. In his account of working class life in the 1840s, Friedrich Engels noted how, at times of desperation, unenfranchised labourers had resorted to forms of incendiarism, rick-burning being a common occurrence.[11] In the thirty years that had intervened, it seems that little had changed in the remoter parishes of England. Jo Draper observes how 'firing ricks or faggots was traditional revenge, and it was occasionally suggested during the 1872–4 dispute that Unionists were revenging themselves on farmers by arson.'[12] Within a month of the fire episode in the *Cornhill, The Times* reported incidents of 'letters threatening incendiary fires . . . received by farmers.' Two months later the destruction of three haystacks was reported near Sheffield and there was 'little doubt that the fire was the work of an incendiary, as all three stacks [having been] fired at the same time.'[13]

Although rick-burning was not sanctioned by the NALU, the farmers and their allies in the press wasted little time in implicating it in such events. In response to 'serious fires in the Eastern counties ascribed to incendiarism, and associated with the disappointed feelings of the Unionists,' the author of one item in *The Times* later that same year made a case that is

[11] Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Classes in England*, edited by D. McLennan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 272.
[12] Jo Draper, 'Never-to-be-forgotten,' p. 52.
[13] 'Incendiary Stack Fire at Gleadless', *The Sheffield and Rotherham Independent,* May 12, 1874, p. 2.

strangely reminiscent of Hardy's use the master and servant metaphor in the February episode:

> there does, indeed, seem a great deal to be done for the labourer; but to give him money because he . . . threatens to burn our houses over our heads and to destroy the stock out of which labour is to be paid is not the way to do him good . . . . The money would be sure all to go to the public-house, while the moral reaction would spoil him either for a good servant or a good master.[14]

While allegations of alcoholism among the labouring poor was nothing new, the charge of arson was clearly more serious. From the first, Union leaders denied their use of incendiarism as a political tactic. Earlier in the year, the *Weymouth Telegram* had quoted one Union member who 'denounced, with emphasis, the "cruel slander" that the union had encouraged their members to set fire to ricks – it was "a foul lie", and if any such members could be found in the Union let them be pointed out, and their names should no longer disgrace the books.'[15] Joseph Arch himself acknowledged at a large meeting in Dorchester in December 1873 that although 'he had even been called the "Arch Apostle of Arson" . . . he had always inculcated moderation'.[16]

For all of the Arch's conciliatory language, by the Spring of 1874 it was clear that open confrontation was on its way. In addition to the immanence of literal fires that even dutiful shepherds would be powerless to combat, in April a 'monster public meeting' of some 2,000 disgruntled labourers at Newmarket welcomed the news that the Union Executive now openly 'condemned the famers who hoped to crush the labourers', exhorting them to hold out to the last.'[17] The tension of the situation was exacerbated by the fact that farmers had begun

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[14] 'Serious Fires in the Eastern Counties,' *The Times,* 28 September, 1874, p. 9

[15] Quoted in Draper, 'Never-to-be-forgotten', p. 50.

[16] *The Times*, 19 December 1873, p. 3.

[17] 'The Royal Commission on The Labour Laws,' *The Times,* 25 March 1874, p. 12.

to dig in by organizing their own associations, collectively agreeing to lock out systematically all employees who were known to be associated with the NALU.

March 1874: Mistress and Men

While the strikers' leaders had regularly cited bad working and living conditions among their grievances, not least the high cost of rent and the meagreness of perquisites, the real focus of NALU protest had from the beginning been the inadequacy of weekly wages. In his memoirs, Arch later recalled how, in the first half of the century, his father's starvation wage of nine shillings a week had brought 'unfair deprivation and genuine hardship' on the family.[18] By May 1872, Arch found himself presiding over a union with over 50,000 members, many from Wiltshire and Hardy's Dorset where wages and conditions had remained the poorest.[19] According to Arch, at the time of the strike in Wellesbourne in 1872, when 100 men came out, some were still only receiving 9 or 10 shillings.[20] This seems to have been true in the village that provided the setting for Hardy's novel where, in 1872, a correspondent in the *Daily Telegraph* reported 'they pay the full standard wages of the county—oftener, I believe, the nine shillings maximum than the eight shillings minimum.'[21] In the year that Hardy's serial was appearing, one witness confirmed that 'the bare money value of labour in the parish is just 9s. a week' while, in addition, throughout the neighbourhood, the usual perquisites had been suspended.[22]

A key episode in the novel that connects Hardy's fictional world with the contemporary wage dispute appeared at exactly the time when it was erupting. The March instalment, which includes the chapter on 'Mistress and Men,' takes up the story after

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[18] Joseph Arch, *Joseph Arch: The Story of His Life Told by Himself* (London: Hutchinson, 1898), pp. 8, 14.
[19] Arch, *Story of His Life,* p. 112.
[20] Arch, *Story of His Life*, p. 76.
[21] 'Arcadians of Dorset,' *Daily Telegraph*, April 30, 1872, p. 5.
[22] George Heath, *The English Peasantry*, p. 32.

Bathsheba Everdene, having inherited from her uncle, becomes mistress at Upper Weatherbury Farm. Summoning her labourers to a meeting to settle outstanding wages, we find her with a ledger book and money-bag before her:

> 'Well now then'—she looked into the book—'Joseph Poorgrass, are you there?'
>
> Yes, sir—ma'am I mane,' said the person addressed. 'I am the personal name of Poorgrass—a small matter who is nothing in his own eye. Perhaps it is different in the eye of other people—but I don't say it; though public thought will out.'
>
> 'What do you do on the farm?'
>
> 'I does carting things all the year, and in seed time I shoots the rooks and sparrows, and helps at pig-killing, sir.'
>
> 'How much to you?'
>
> 'Please nine and ninepence and a good halfpenny where 'twas a bad one, sir—Ma'am I mane.'
>
> 'Quite correct. Now here are ten shillings in addition as a small present, as I am a new comer.'
>
> Bathsheba blushed slightly as she spoke at the sense of being generous in public, and Henery Fray, who had drawn up towards her chair, lifted his eyebrows and fingers to express amazement on a small scale.
>
> 'How much do I owe you—that man in the corner—what's your name?' continued Bathsheba.
>
> 'Matthew Moon, ma'am,' said a singular framework of clothes with nothing of any consequence inside them, which advanced with the toes in no definite direction forwards, but turned in or out as they chanced to swing.
>
> 'Matthew Mark, did you say?—speak out—I shall not hurt you,' enquired the young farmer, kindly.
>
> 'Matthew Moon, mem,' said Henery Fray, correcting from behind her chair, to which point he had edged himself.
>
> 'Matthew Moon,' murmured Bathsheba, turning her bright eyes to the book. 'Ten and two-pence halfpenny is the sum put down to you, I see?'
>
> 'Yes, mis'ess,' said Matthew, as the rustle of wind among dead leaves,
>
> 'Here it is, and ten shillings.' (*CM,* 29: 262-263)

And so it continues. To those readers of the *Cornhill* who had been following the wage dispute in the national press, this episode would surely have had particular resonance. At the beginning of thecrisis, in October 1872, the farmers' association had agreed that 'no member shall make any alteration in the rate of wages he is at any time paying his labourers.'[23] Had Hardy shown his heroine to be more generous than her uncle by increasing weekly pay at the height of the wage crisis, there may very well have been raised eyebrows. Instead, by

[23] Frederick Clifford, *The Agricultural Lock-Out of 1874* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1875), p. 3

affording each labourer an additional one-off dowry payment of ten shillings, Bathsheba's actions imply 'kindly' benevolence, while keeping the old regime intact.

May 1874: The Shearing Supper

While it might be argued that, in the fraught political climate, this episode allowed Hardy to negotiate the wage crisis through a series of philanthropic gestures without disturbing the status quo, Fred Reid regards it as indicative of a novel in which 'the employment relations of farmers and work folk are [throughout] paternalistic.'[24] Another instance of paternalism, also cited by Reid, occurred two months later in a passage describing the annual shearing celebrations:

> For the shearing-supper a long table was placed on the grass-plot beside the house, the end of the table being thrust over the sill of the wide parlour-window and a foot or two into the room. Miss Everdene sat inside the window, facing down the table. She was thus at the head, without mingling with the men. (*CM:* 29: 525)

[INSERT FIGURE]

Caption: Fig: 'She stood up in the window-opening, facing the Men', *The Cornhill Magazine*, May 1874 (Author)

This was one of the few episodes singled out for illustration in the *Cornhill*, and one the most complex examples of the *spatial politics* that occur regularly throughout the novel. Faithful to Hardy's text, the illustrator, Helen Paterson, portrays the moment when 'Boldwood had gone

[24] Fred Reid, *Thomas Hardy and History* (London: Palgrave, 2017), p. 125.

inside the room' while the labourers remain outside, looking in, Gabriel standing 'immediately outside the sash-frame.' (*CM,* 29: 528)

While the comings and goings of characters might ordinarily seem like mere plot devices, the cunningly arranged indoor-outdoor table here is emblematic of a much larger social question that dominated discussions of labour relations at the time in which Hardy's novel was set. In the 1820s William Cobbett could look nostalgically back on the world of his own childhood before the breakdown of relations between farmer and labourer Cobbett remarked in *Rural Rides* on the growing distinction between master and men then beginning to undermine established social relations that had reached back for generations. Old sociabilities, Cobbett argued, were now giving way to modern class distinctions with farmers coming increasingly to live separate lives from their workers. In former times, observed Cobbett, at the beginning of the working day, farm hands had routinely 'eaten in,' taking breakfast with the farmer at his table. Since which time the situation between masters and men had markedly changed:

> The land produces, on an average, what it has always produced, but there is a new distribution of the produce. This 'Squire Charrington's father used, I dare say, to sit at the head of the oak-table along with his men, say grace to them, and cut up the meat and the pudding. He might take a cup of strong beer to himself, when they had none; but that was pretty nearly all the difference in their manner of living. But the 'squire [now] had many wine-decanters and wine-glasses and 'a dinner set' and a 'breakfast set' and 'dessert knives;' and these evidently imply carryings on and a consumption that must of necessity have greatly robbed the long oak table had it remained fully tenanted. That long table could not share in the work of the decanters and dinner set. Therefore, it became almost untenanted; the labourers retreated to hovels, called cottages; and instead of board and lodging, they got money; so little of it as to enable the employer to drink wine; but, then that he might not reduce them to starvation, they were enabled to come to him, in the king's name, and demand food as paupers.[25]

Cobbett's observations would not have been out of place in the 1870s, when the gentrification and growing class consciousness that he identified in the 1820s were becoming

[25] William Cobbett, *Rural Rides*, 2 volumes, edited by Asa Briggs (New York: Cosimo, 2005), 1: 265-68.

yet more explicit in the southern counties. Those elements that he here criticised—conspicuous consumption and class distinction—had since become common. As Reid comments, 'at the shearing supper . . . farmers and servants sit apart – the work folk outside, the farmers indoors – instead of sharing the meal in the farmhouse, as Cobbett recorded them doing in the eighteenth century.'[26] As Reid's observation implies, the shearing supper episode can be seen to operate in the larger context of a novel which presents separate class domains, a world where genteel farmers were coming to inhabit the big houses – 'too neat for a dirty-shoed carter allowed to come into' – and men congregate in their cottages or at the tavern. Take, for instance, the end of the February fire episode, where Bathsheba offers a reward her men for their loyal labours:

> "Men," said Bathsheba, "you shall take a little refreshment after this extra work. Will you come to the house?"[27]

But they know their place:

> "We could knock in a bit and a drop a good deal freer, Miss, if so be ye'd send it to Warren's Malthouse,' replied the spokesman.' (*CM,* 30: 673)

True to form, the labourers recognise the farmhouse is not an appropriate place for them any more and that in the scheme of things the tavern is a more fitting place to socialise. Indeed. it was at Warren's earlier in the year that the conversation had turned to the recent gentrification of the farmhouse:

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[26] Fred Reid, *Thomas Hardy and History* (London: Palgrave, 2017), p. 126.

[27] Hardy revised Bathsheba's speech for the novel publication, adding 'or shall I send out something?' Significantly, the 'Mistress and Men' episode of two months earlier, in which Bathsheba met her labour force for the first time, was the first and last time that the labourers would enter the farmhouse. The cool demeanour that she presents to Gabriel, now reduced to the role of shepherd, at the conclusion of the meeting is attributed by the narrator to 'the social rise which had advanced her from a cottage to a large house and fields.' Curiously, apart from Gabriel's humble home early in the novel, we are given no access to the living quarters of the labourers.

> “I wonder what a farmer-woman can want with a harpsichord, dulcimer, pianner or whatever ‘tis they d’call it,” said the maltster. “Liddy saith she’ve a new one.”
>
> “Got a pianner?”
>
> “Ay. Seems her old uncle’s things were not good enough for her. She’ve bought all but everything new. There’s heavy chairs for the stout, weak and wiry ones for the slender; great watches getting on the size of clocks, to stand upon the chimbley-piece.”
>
> “Pictures, for the most part wonderful frames.”
>
> “Long horse-hair settles for the drunk, with horse-hair pillows at each end.”
>
> “Looking-glasses for the pretty.”
>
> “Lying books for the wicked.”
>
> “Yes,” said Henery Fray. “Then the next thing ‘twill be as ‘tis always with these toppermost farmers as they grow grand; the parlour will have to be a drawing room, the kitchen must then forsooth be a parlour.” (*CM,* 29: 387)

The labourers’ reflections on the reorganisation of the farmhouse—identified as a shift from the world of collective *bonhomie* around the solid oak table of former times to the *arriviste* world of pianos, pictures, and novels—had heralded for Cobbett the end of a whole way of life:

> When the old farm-houses are down (and down they must come in time) what a miserable thing the county will be! Those that are now erected are mere painted shells, with a mistress within, who is stuck up in a place she calls a parlour [containing] some showy chairs and a sofa (a sofa by all means): half a dozen prints in gilt frames hanging up: some swinging book-shelves with novels and tracts upon them: a dinner brought in by a girl that is perhaps better ‘educated’ than she: two or three nick-nacks to eat instead of a piece of bacon and a pudding: the house too neat for a dirty-shoed carter to be allowed to come into; and everything proclaiming to every sensible beholder that there is a constant anxiety to make a show not warranted by the reality.[28]

While modern readers tend to interpret Bathsheba’s preoccupation with her own looks and her social vanity as mere character flaws, seen in the context of Cobbett’s observations and the discussion in Warren’s malt house, to some nineteenth-century readers they may have

[28] Cobbett, *Rural Rides, I:* 267-68

been as much about the increasing gentrification of the farming class as a whole. Indeed, there is evidence from the press coverage of those sympathetic to the strikers during the crisis of 1872-74 of a return to the same theme of the increasingly privileged lifestyles of farmers compared to the impoverished lives of poor farmhands. In 1872, the *Weymouth Telegram* had reported that one meeting had descended into verbal sparring between labourers and farmers, the latter being shouted down with the charge that 'gentlemen farmers ride better horses than the owners of the land . . . . If they do with less luxuries they could give better wages.'[29]

By the Spring of 1874, though, the expulsion of labourers from the master's table was giving way to more immediate forms of exclusion. By March 23rd 2,000 agricultural labourers were locked out and by the middle of April the number was 7,000.[30] Far from helping their cause, farmers soon found that the unintended outcome of their uncompromising stance was increased sympathy for the Union in the mainstream press. In protest against the lockouts, a meeting of 10,000 agitators at Yeovil was reported at the end of May, garnering the support of prominent churchmen and other dignitaries and also attended by a number of other labour unions.[31] In late June, another massive rally was held in Manchester with the support of a number of influential figures, including William Gaskell (husband of novelist) who appeared as secretary of the Agricultural Labourers Relief Committee. At the same meeting, a letter from the Bishop of Manchester, entitled 'Are the Farmers of England Mad?' was distributed among the crowd.[32]

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[29] Quoted in Draper, 'Never-to-be-forgotten,' p. 45.
[30] W. Hasbach, *A History of the English Agricultural Labourer*, translated by Ruth Kenyon (London: King, 1908), p. 285.

[31] 'The Lock-Out of Farm Labourers,' *The Times*, May 27, 1874, p. 5
[32] 'The Farm Labourers at Manchester,' *The Times*, June 22, 1874, p. 12.

With the tide beginning to turn, and perhaps seeking to catch this wave of public sympathy for the NALU, Leslie Stephen commissioned for the June number of the *Cornhill* a substantial article on 'Agricultural Labourers'. If it is too much to say it was intended as a corrective to Hardy's serial, alongside which it appeared, its representation of rural conditions certainly stood in stark contrast to it. 'There are many now who, looking on some almost deserted village,' it began, 'which have sent as emigrants all that is best of their youth and vigour, consider that England's true peasantry, loyal, devout, humble to their betters, are gone away as completely as the medieval England which the poets sang.' (*CM,* 29: 686) Not only does the anonymous author (in fact, the journalist T.E. Kebbell) set out to provide an unsentimental account of poverty in the shires, but he goes on to launch a direct attack on the kind of romantic idealism that characterized Hardy's novel:

> To those who think it is such pleasant and picturesque employment, that the labourer's life is an idyll, only needing to be translated into words, we would recommend that they should go, not only on some fine summer's evening when the heat of the day is declining, "with Thestylis to bind the sheaves," but with Roger on a foggy November morning, to spread rotten mulch over the heavy clay land; not only to "hear the milk sing in the pail, with buzzings of the honied hours," but to milk those same cows at four o'clock in the winter, when the frost is on the grass, and a keen north wind blowing across the pastures. (*CM,* 29: 693)

Referring to the moderate pronouncements of Arch –'a simple-minded, straightforward, honourable man' – it concludes with the observation that 'this is no movement of a rash communism, no pulling down of one class at the expense of another, but merely the determination that the labourer shall share in the general prosperity of the country.'[33]

August 1874: The Storm—The Two Together

[33] [T.E. Kebbel], 'The Agricultural Labourer', *Cornhill Magazine*, Kebbell was a conservative journalist, whose monograph on *The Agricultural Labourer* had been published to some acclaim by Chapman and Hall in 1870. In 1864 he had contributed 'The Life of a Farm Labourer' to *The Cornhill*. By the time that he wrote his article in 1874 he was leader writer for *The Standard*.

Kebbel's article seemed to capture the mood of sympathy caused by the lock outs, but it was short-lived. What had begun as an expression of local grievances, had developed into a national crisis. As the solidarity of good will gave way to the concerns of self-interest, with harvest on its way, exasperated commentators in the conservative press were soon offering accounts of widespread indolence and drunkenness among agricultural workers up and down the country. By the Autumn of 1874, what qualified NALU support there had been in the mainstream press earlier in the year rapidly receded, leading the Union leadership to call an end in September to their actions. While some local advances in pay and conditions had been achieved by the strikes, at the end of the day it also left many members more impoverished, unemployed, and homeless.

The August number of *Far From the Madding Crowd*, appearing a month before the collapse of the strike, was unfortunately timed for the cause of the NALU. Read against the fire-fighting scene in February with its co-operative message, August's instalment showed an unmistakeable representational shift. While Hardy employs the familiar device of accounting for each individual labourer by name, this time the collective rallying cry to save the crops is replaced by a catalogue of infamy:

> Gabriel looked in. An offensive picture met his eye. . . . Here, under the table, and leaning against forms and chairs in every conceivable attitude except the perpendicular, were the wretched persons of all the workfolk, the hair of their heads at such low levels being suggestive of mops and brooms. . . . Coggan was on his back, with his mouth open, buzzing forth snores, as were several others; the united breathings of the horizontal assemblage forming a subdued road like London from a distance. Joseph Poorgrass was curled round in the fashion of a hedgehog, apparently in attempts to present the least possible portion of his surface to the air; and behind him was dimly visible an unimportant remnant of William Smallbury. (*CM,* 30: 247)

As the cinematic eye moves away from the comatose workers, Oak makes his way towards the fields as a 'lonely figure' in a landscape, signalling his movement as a member of a cooperative society to a self-sufficient individual in a hostile world. The title of the following

chapter, 'The Storm—The Two Together', indicates that, as the narrative crisis comes to a head, the emphasis will be on Oak and Bathsheba, now no longer employer and employee but heroic solitaries battling against the ignorance of society and an impersonal natural order. Whereas in the fire episode each villager retained his individual identity throughout the crisis, the labourers were now eventually reduced to a lumpen mass: as the storm heightens, darkness falls on 'the steady buzz of many snores.'

That the storm episode represents an outright castigation of the labouring class would be a judgement a little too harsh; later in the same chapter the blame is shifted:

> To be just, the men were not greatly to blame for this painful and demoralising termination to the evening's entertainment. Sergeant Troy had so strenuously insisted, glass in hand, that drinking should be the bond of their union, that those who wished to refuse hardly liked to be so unmannerly under the circumstances. Having from their youth up been entirely unaccustomed to any liquor stronger than cider or mild ale, it was no wonder that they had succumbed one and all with extraordinary uniformity after the lapse of about an hour. (*CM,* 30: 248)

And yet it is perhaps significant that this cautionary passage appeared after many months during which Arch and the NALU executive had argued that generosity on the part of farmers to their employees could not fail to yield mutually beneficial results. Among the grievances that labour interests had often voiced was the loss of perquisites, among which harvest beer often figured. Militant farmers, on the other hand, had maintained, throughout the dispute, that accession to such demands would spell agricultural ruin. Typical was a letter to the *Weymouth Telegram* earlier in the year, in which 'A Dorset Farmer' had associated the Union cause with the prevalence of drunkenness:

> A Dorset man in hard work is usually in a state of chronic fuddle, and often quarrelsome. The drinking at the farm begets thirst, which is attempted to be allayed at the public-house or in the town. Few Dorset labourers consider it right to return from the towns without half a pint, which means as much as can be got. If it be asked if his family is better off? My answer must be, decidedly

> worse. I find the wife does not get more to keep house than she did; the rest is going to drink, unionism, and its consequent restlessness and excitement.[34]

In the very week that readers of the *Cornhill* were witnessing Troy's act of unadvised benevolence towards his labourers at the beginning of August, they were also reading in *The Times* the following analysis of the real situation in the shires:

> So much has been said about the perquisites enjoyed by farm labourers . . . grants or privileges which may be fairly reckoned as money's worth and added to the nominal weekly wages. First may come the beer—a perquisite of doubtful advantage, though I am bound to say it is one generally popular among the men who receive it . . . . I need not repeat the statements contained in previous letters as to the quantity of beer served out to the labourers in most farmhouses. But, however popular it may be with the men, it is a vicious system. It teaches the young lads to drink, if they need any such teaching.

If only Troy had been a devout reader of the *Times*, he would have learned the prudence of those farmers who 'have this year discontinued the gifts of harvest beer'. He would also have discovered the pecuniary advantages to be had from employing abstemious Irish immigrants who lived 'chiefly on milk and meal'.[35]

Might we perhaps take such coincidences of fiction and reportage as cases of life imitating art? Might it be fair to say that the accumulated effect of over six months of working-class indolence in the national press had primed the reading public for the reception of the irresponsible Weatherbury binge? Either way, the very existence of such coincidences suggests something of the complex interplay that can exist as representation operates between

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[34] *Weymouth Telegram*, 27 March, 1874.

[35] The author of the anonymous letter turned out to be Frederick Clifford, who later reprinted it in *The Agricultural Lock-out of 1874*, p. 229-30. In fact, the leadership and many of the members of the NALU appear not to have been drinkers. In 1872 one union official was reported as saying that 'We have found it desirable to get Christian men and teetotallers as officers.' *Weymouth Telegram*, 21 Sept 1872, quoted in Draper, 'Never-to-be-forgotten,' p. 71.

the ‘literary’ and the ‘documentary’, reminding us of the connection made by Shand and others between ‘current literature’ and ‘current news.’

December 1874: A Note of Admiration

If, in March, Bathsheba had confided in her servant that Oak ‘wasn’t quite good enough for me’, by December the faithful shepherd had proved himself worthy. In November, readers had already witnessed, in a chapter called ‘Oak’s Advancement,’ their hero’s sudden socio-economic rise from a humble shepherd, first to the post of Bathsheba’s bailiff—involving a ‘substantial increase of wages,’ then a few paragraphs later his advancement as Boldwood’s business partner: a position that afforded him ‘a share of the receipts—a small share certainly, yet it was money of a higher quality than mere wages, and capable of expansion in a way that wages were not.’ (*CM,* 30: 622)

One important aspect of the movement toward December’s resolution in the final number, therefore, is to be found in the provision of class mobility for Gabriel himself. Before the shooting scene, in which the interloping Troy and Boldwood are conveniently removed from the picture, Oak’s entry into the landed class is carefully orchestrated, a just reward for his vigilance, loyalty, and hard work throughout the extent of the novel: for the ‘time and thought’ that Oak has given his job, and because throughout their association Gabriel has ‘behaved like a man’ in the face of adversity retaining ‘goodness of heart’, Boldwood informs him that he is soon to take full financial control of Little Weatherbury Farm. The moral significance of such a development would not have been lost on those readers familiar with the kind of edifying narratives in which hard work and loyalty were seen to be two of the essential prerequisites for social and economic advancement. By the time that Hardy’s novel appeared, Samuel Smiles was already to be found on many respectable family bookshelves in the form of the age’s best-selling moral primer, *Self-Help*

(1859). Its sequels—*Character* (1871), *Thrift* (1875), and *Duty* (1880)—with their valorisation of hard work for the inculcation of 'obedience, self-control, attention, application, and perseverence' all appeared within a few years of *Far From the Madding Crowd*. Smiles's tracts certainly augured well for the likes of Gabriel Oak, who in their pages could have learned about the way that such diligence had been rewarded in ancient times, 'the highest compliment' being 'to call a man a good agriculturalist'.[36] As Hughes and Lund have observed, the Smilesian virtues of long-suffering and patience in the face of adversity can be seen as ideologically inscribed in the serial form itself which 'insisted on steady application over great reaches of time to achieve distant rewards.'[37]

From Boldwood's emulation of the patience of Jacob in his seven-year sojourn for Rachel, to Bathsheba's emotional 'deeds of endurance' after the death of Troy, to poor Fanny's struggle along the Casterbridge Road, Oak's own trials are punctuated throughout by a series of complementary acts of heroic patience. And as an exemplary character, an ideal type of agricultural labourer, there were no doubt lessons to be learned from the life of Gabriel Oak by those who, in recent months, had been less than willing to accept with rectitude *their* day-to-day adversities. One revealing feature of the December number is the subtle way in which the rapid dissolution of the intractable Weatherbury caste system is brought about not only by Oak's advancement but also by the class mobility that is granted to the labourers around him. By December, Cain Ball had been promoted from deputy to fully fledged shepherd; Laban Tall had become respectable as the newly appointed 'clerk of the parish'. In preparation for his Christmas party, we are told, Boldwood has been unusually 'indiscriminate' with his invitations, bringing together almost as equals Bathsheba and her maidservant as well as local farmers and their humble employees. Read against the previous

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[36] Samuel Smiles, *Character* (London: John Murray, 1871), p. 89n.
[37] Hughes and Lund, *The Victorian Serial*, p. 5.

March episode in which labourers are set at arm's length from employers by the cunningly arranged indoor-outdoor table, Boldwood's open-door policy marks a clear narrative shift towards more inclusive social relations. By the time readers reached the final Christmas number, the transformation was complete as class and class were defined no longer as 'mistress and men' but united as 'friends and neighbours'. So pronounced are the tropes of reconciliation in the final pages of the novel that there are few more symbolically utopian moments in Victorian fiction:

> The two sat down very quietly to tea in Bathsheba's parlour in the evening of the same day, for it had been arranged that Farmer Oak should go there to live, since he had yet neither money, house, nor furniture worthy of the name, though he was on a sure way towards them, whilst Bathsheba was, comparatively, in a plethora of all three. Just as Bathsheba was pouring out a cup of tea their ears were greeted by the firing of a cannon followed by what seemed like a tremendous blowing of trumpets, in the front of the house.
>
> "There!" said Oak laughing, "I knew those fellows were up to something, by the look on their faces."
>
> Oak took up the light and went into the porch, followed by Bathsheba with a shawl over her head. The rays fell on a group of male figures gathered upon the gravel in front, who, when they saw the newly married couple in the porch, set up a loud "Hurrah!" and at the same moment bang again went the cannon in the background, followed by a hideous clang of music from the drum, tambourine, clarionet, serpent, hautboy, tenor-viol, and double-bass—the only remaining relics of the true and original Weatherbury band—venerable worm-eaten instruments which had celebrated in their own persons the victories of Marlborough, under the fingers of the forefathers of those who played them now. The performers came forward and marched up to the front. (*CM*, 30: 672)

As the music swells, the very instruments on which it is played affirm the organic continuity of a community recalling the peace and stability of the years after the victories of Marlborough, untouched by the conflict of the political present. As Gabriel takes tea with his new bride within the walls of privilege, readers could find satisfaction in the fact that the faithful shepherd's fortunes have come right. Significantly, the story ends with an invitation to the labourers into the farmhouse:

> “Those bright boys Mark Clark and Jan are at the bottom of all this,” said Oak. “Come in souls, and have something to eat with me and my wife.”

But once more they know their place:

> “Not to-night,” said Mr Clark, with evident self-denial. “Thank ye all the same, but we’ll call at a more seemly time. However, we couldn’t think of letting the day pass without a note of admiration of some sort. If ye could send a drop of som’at down to Warren’s, why so it is. Here’s long life and happiness to Neighbour Oak and his comely bride!”
>
> “Thank ye—thank ye all,” said Gabriel. “A bit and a drop shall be sent to Warren’s for ye at once. I had thought that we might very likely get a salute of some sort from our old friends, and I was saying so to my wife but now.” (*CM,* 30: 672-3)

On the very day that a merry band of well-fed labourers was serenading Gabriel Oak into his well-earned pastoral bower, outside the fictional world of Wessex the outlook for the real Coggins and Clarks was bleaker. By August, ‘all available [union] funds were exhausted and the farmers had won.’[38] By the end of the year it was clear that, despite all of the efforts of the NALU, 1874 had yielded for the farmer higher than average crops, with the added advantage that they had been gathered more cheaply than ever, thanks to the importation of foreign workers and the use of labour-saving machinery. The agricultural depressions of the late 1870s were on the horizon and what gains the labourers had made during their months of sacrifice, observes one historian, were lost as ‘nationally, agricultural wages . . . returned to their pre-1872 levels by the end of the decade.’[39]

The dispute had lasted over five months, during which thousands of labourers had been locked out and their families evicted at what should have been the most remunerative time of the agricultural calendar. By the end of the year many had chosen to take passages to Canada and Australia, severing ties with friends and relatives forever; others joined the

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[38] Donald Read, *The Age of Urban Democracy: England 1868-1914* (London: Longman, 1994), p. 21

[39] Jo Draper, ‘Never-to-be-forgotten,’ p. 75.

increased migration to the cities in search of work; less fortunate were those who remained unemployed after the events of 1874, and whose destination was the workhouse.

In the end, the events of the year had rendered the power base of the rural landowning class more secure than ever, so that five years later Hardy would at last take up the cause of healthier living arrangements and better working conditions for the agricultural working classes in an article called 'The Dorsetshire Labourer', a cause that he was to continue to champion in his later fiction.[40] In 1890, he also had cause to reflect on the way in which the periodical form had restrained his own writing. He might even have been thinking of *Far From the Madding Crowd* when he observed that monthly magazines and circulating libraries 'in general do not foster the growth of the novel which reflects and reveals life.'[41]

One fact remains: as a serial tailor-made for the polite literary audience of metropolitan drawing-rooms, an author's fame may have been secured, but little had been achieved for the labouring poor by *Far From the Madding Crowd* and its withdrawal from the political realities of the moment. That the story was popular is unmistakeable: during its twelve months' progress, subscriptions to the *Cornhill* held firm at a period when circulation figures were in general decline. When it was reissued as a two-volume novel in November, 1874, Smith & Elder rapidly sold out the initial run of 1,000 copies, necessitating seven more printings within a month.[42] Despite the book's pecuniary success, it was with regret that Hardy later recalled the 'unusual frequency' with which he observed 'during their journeys to

[40] Thomas Hardy 'The Dorsetshire Labourer,' Longman's Magazine, (July 1883) pp. 252-269. The Dorset Agricultural Labourers' Union reissued the article it as a pamphlet entitled 'The Dorset Farm Labourer Past and Present' in 1884 [copy British Library, BL 8276.T.4]
[41] Thomas Hardy, 'Candour in English Fiction,' *New Review* (January, 1890), p. 17.
[42] Smith & Elder papers, National Library of Scotland.

and from London, ladies carrying about copies of it with Mudie's label on the cover'.[43] When these words were written Mudie's Circulating Library had already become a by-word for puritanical decency and outmoded conservatism.

By the end of 1874, as the first two-volume edition of *Far From the Madding Crowd* hit the market, the major reviews began to appear. On December 19, Richard Holt Hutton writing in *The Spectator,* was one of the first to capture the incredulity:

> The reader who has any general acquaintance with the civilization of the Wiltshire or Dorsetshire labourer, with his average wages, and his average intelligence, will be disposed to say at once that a more incredible picture than that of the group of farm labourers as a whole which Mr. Hardy has given us can hardly be conceived.[44]

Looking back at the events of the previous year, Andrew Lang in the *Academy* for January 1875 observed:

> The country folk have not heard of strikes, or Mr. Arch; they have, to all appearances plenty to eat and warm clothes to wear and when the sheep are shorn in the ancient town of Weatherbury, the scene is one that Shakespeare or Chaucer might have watched. This immobile rural existence is what the novelist has to paint.[45]

As both Hutton and Lang's reviews suggest, *Far From the Madding Crowd* had provoked fundamental questions about the function of literature at times of political crisis. We will never know how many readers the novel found among the farm labourers of Dorset in 1874. But it is evidence of their belief in the ameliorating power of literature that at the height of the unrest of 1874 the unionists *did* search for a work of fiction that would articulate for them their personal plight. Significantly, it was Disraeli's harrowing descriptions of rural poverty

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[43] Florence Emily Hardy, *Life of Thomas Hardy*, 1840-1928 (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 101.

[44] Richard Holt Hutton, review of *Far From the Madding Crowd, The Spectator, (19 December 1874),*

[45] Andrew Lang,' review of *Far From the Madding Crowd*, *The Academy*, 2 January, 1875, p. 9.

in the fictional town of Marney from *Sybil* that in the end the labourers chose to reprint for distribution 'in every hamlet', and not the conciliatory romance of Hardy's Wessex.[46]

[46] 'The Royal Commission on the Labour Laws,' *The Times*, Wednesday, March 25, 1874, p. 12. A number of nineteenth-century commentators remarked on the tension between an imagined literary landscape and the harsh realities among which the common folk lived. In 1856, John Glyde had written, 'The simplicity and innocence of peasant life exists only in [the] imagination.' John Glyde, *Suffolk in the Nineteenth Century* (London, Simpkin, Marshall 1856), p. 145, quoted in John E. Archer, *By a Flash and a Scare: Incendiarism, Animal Maiming, and Poaching in East Anglia, 1815-1870* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), p.257]. Archer goes on to comment that 'rural England may well have been picturesque to those who could afford to look, but the realities of its indigenous poor was far different; it was for many years a mean and unpleasant land.'