

Hardy's Secret Self-Portrait

By HENRY REED

The Life of Thomas Hardy
Macmillan, 30s.

BY FLORENCE EMILY HARDY.

MANY artists have led two lives, and out of consideration for their biographers they have usually contrived to lead them both at the same time. Thomas Hardy also had two lives, but they were inconveniently placed end to end.

There is a great division in his life round about 1897 when he ceased to be a novelist and returned to poetry. Biography of him will always be, from the point of view of shape, bedevilled by this fact.

There is plenty of incident, movement and emotional adventure in the first 57 years of his life. In the last 30 years that remained to him—from his own point of view his most valuable creative years—biographically dramatic landmarks are few indeed.

Official Life

The present volume suffers unavoidably from this tailing away of interest. It is the "official" life, originally published in two parts, the first in 1928 within a few months of Hardy's death, the second in 1930.

The work is still attributed on its title-page to the second Mrs. Hardy, and we are left to wonder how its publishers have never got wind of the real facts of its composition, which were divulged as long ago as 1954 in Richard L. Purdy's monumental bibliographical study. **The Life of Thomas Hardy** is, in fact, save for its last four chapters, Hardy's own autobiography, and should be announced as such.

It is, by any standards, a ramshackle work, and its information is in many places demonstrably inaccurate even when there seems no point in disguise. But the book is packed with a miscellany of information not available elsewhere, and readers who care for Hardy will find it everywhere endearing, engaging, and full of his characteristic humour:

"There are two sorts of church people: those who go and those who don't go: there is only one sort of chapel-people: those who go."

There is, above all, the sense of being "with" Hardy himself: every page is invested with his own idiosyncrasies of vision and style.

Dorset Childhood

The early chapters are particularly impressive. He recreates his childhood and youth in Dorset and his days in London with fair objectivity. There is much room for correction of fact, but in mood and atmosphere his own account will scarcely be bettered.

Part of its charm comes, I think, from Hardy's genuine and characteristic modesty of manner. He was well on into his seventies when he embarked on the work, yet he never indulges in the reminiscent pride we so often have to wince at in writers' memoirs.

And there is no trace of that excessive self-esteem which sometimes indicates an unconscious sense of failure and is so painful in (to come no nearer home) a writer like Bernard Shaw.

All the same, there is much that is defensive in these pages, and this provides strange matter for study. A good deal of care seems to have been taken to make things opaque when Hardy wished them to be.

Blank mendacity he rarely has recourse to: on the whole he probably tells fewer positive lies than most people. But he is at pains to mislead us about things that had affronted him in the circumstances of his own life or worried him in his relations with the highly class-conscious society of his time.

It is in his art that we find the rectification of these evasions and deceptions. His art might often be bad art, its badness the more conspicuous for lying cheek by jowl with his incomparable best. But it was faithful to his own experience, and the recurrent themes of his fiction were the basic themes of his own life.

The contrast of humble birth and lofty aspiration, the struggle for education and learning, the uncertainty of passion, the dissatisfaction with marriage as a solution to the problems of sex, the commonness of external adversity and of simple bad luck—all these went into his novels and his poems.

There is little or nothing of them, however, in the official life; and we are at times as conscious of this little-or-nothing as we would be if there were whole blank pages in the book.

Meant as a Protest

However, the thing was, not meant as a confession: nor was it undertaken with any marked relish: quite the contrary. It came into being largely as a protest against recurrent public mis-statements about Hardy's own experiences. It was not meant to be a source for future biographies: it was meant to be an obstacle in their way.

So far it has proved highly successful in this aim. The biographical studies of Hardy published since his death compete lamentably with each other in the inaccuracy of their employment both of the "official" material given here and of the other pieces of significant information that have seeped out in more recent years.

In the circumstances this republication—in a very convenient form—of Hardy's own account of himself is, for all its defects, a timely and refreshing recall to order.

Missionary Hero

By THE ARCHBISHOP
OF YORK

Hudson Taylor and Maria by
J. C. POLLOCK. Hodder, 16s.

A SWEEP of history is often best mastered by reading the biographies of those who were the chief actors within it. The history of the Church of England, for example, in this century could be pretty well learnt by anyone who was willing to read, say, Bell's "Life of Randall Davidson," Lockhart's "Lang," Iremonger's "William Temple," Prestige's "Gore."