

Thomas Hardy, *We Field-Women*

Special Collections featured item for May 2008 by
Rupert Wood, Head of Collections.

Hardy, Thomas (1840–1928). ‘We Field-Women’, holograph manuscript in the Papers of Gerald and Joy Finzi (MS 1399), University of Reading Special Collections Service.

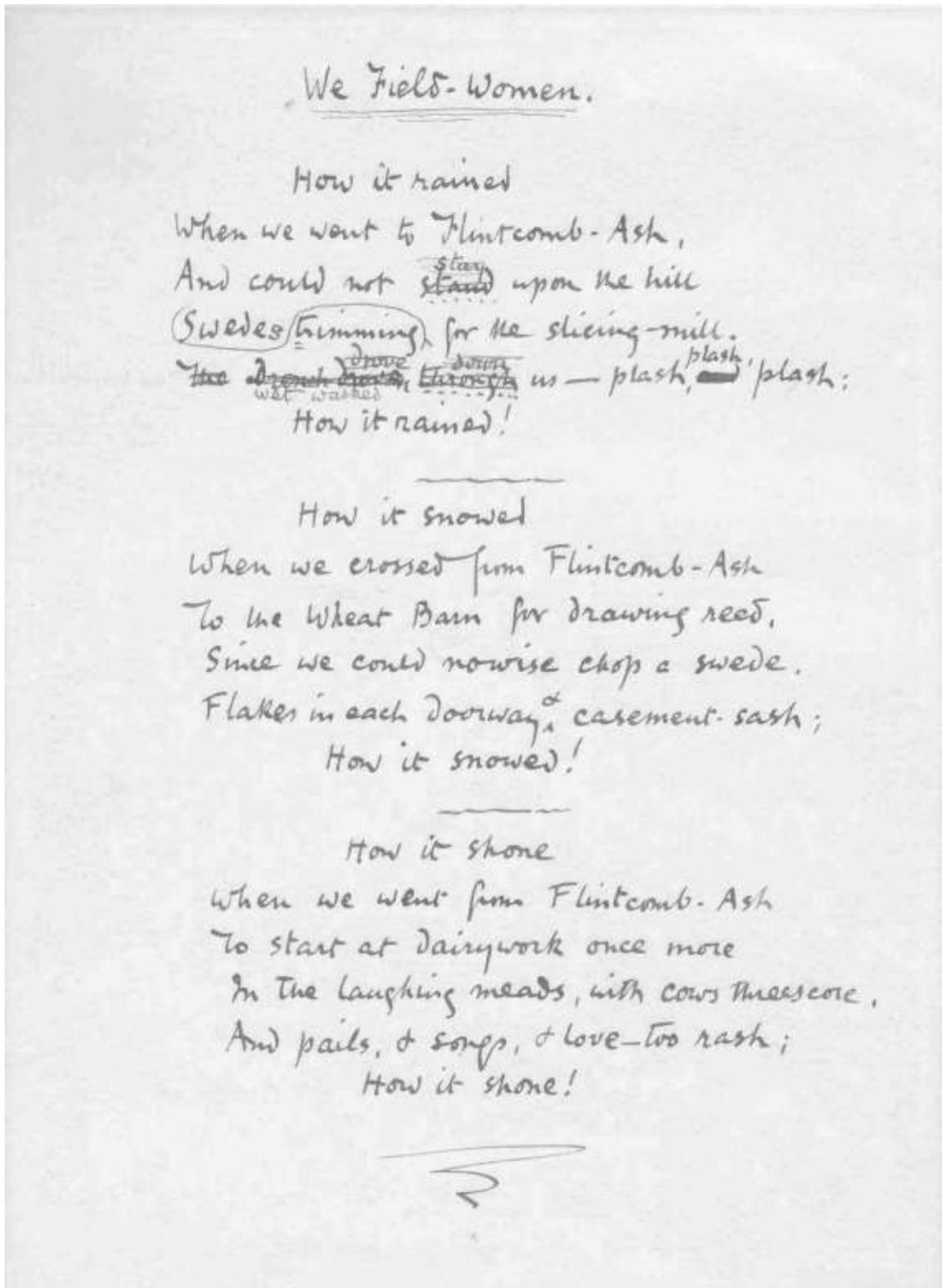
‘We Field-Women’ was first published in *Winter words in various moods and metres*, 1928.



Thomas Hardy *[shown left]*, who was one of the great nineteenth century novelists, is also widely celebrated as one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century, and one of the greatest lyric poets in the English language. His poetry is notable for its emotional sincerity and clarity of expression, its empathy with a wide range of people and situations, its humour, and its approachability. The University of Reading is fortunate to own this manuscript of one of his poems.

Although not one of his most famous verses, *We Field-Women* *[shown below]* is nevertheless highly characteristic of his ‘Wessex’ style, and demonstrates some of his endearing poetic qualities. The poem is explicitly related to his famous novel *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* (1891), with which it shares subject matter. The Reading manuscript is also of some textual interest as it includes a few variants in the poet’s hand. In addition, the provenance of this manuscript is of note because it was once owned by Gerald Finzi the composer, whose song settings include fifty-two poems by Hardy (many more than by any other poet), and show

particular insight into Hardy's art. The manuscript was given to the University Library by the composer's widow, Joy Finzi, in 1974.



The Reading manuscript of We Field-Women [above] and transcript [below].

We Field-Women

How it rained
When we went to Flintcomb-Ash,
And could not stand upon the hill
Trimming Swedes for the slicing-mill.
Wet washed through us – splash, splash, splash: 5
How it rained!

How it snowed
When we crossed from Flintcomb-Ash
To the Wheat Barn for drawing reed,
Since we could nowise chop a swede. 10
Flakes in each doorway & casement-sash;
How it snowed!

How it shone
When we went from Flintcomb-Ash
To start at dairywork once more 15
In the laughing meads, with cows threescore,
And pails, & songs, & love – too rash;
How it shone!

Tess Durbeyfield

The poem is related to Hardy's heroine and her friends from the novel *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*. Chapter 42 of the novel sees Tess, separated from her husband Angel Clare, trying to find work and travelling to where her friend Marion is staying. "First she inquired for the lighter kinds of employment, and ... applied next for the less light, till, beginning with the dairy and poultry tendance that she liked best, she ended with the heavy and coarse pursuits which she liked least – work on arable land: work of such roughness, indeed, as she would never have deliberately volunteered for." Eventually she reaches Flintcomb-Ash (as in the poem; Hardy's Wessex name for a farm a few miles from Alton Pancras, which is eight miles north of Dorchester) and joins Marion working at 'swede-hacking', one of the toughest jobs of all. "There was not a tree within sight ... - nothing but fallow and turnips everywhere; in large fields divided by hedges plashed to unrelieved levels Female field-labour was seldom offered now, and its cheapness made it profitable for tasks which women could perform as readily as men." Here the hedges have been 'plashed' not by the rain, but by the farmers cutting them back.

The swede work is described: "The upper half of each turnip had been eaten off by the livestock, and it was the business of the two women to grub up the lower or earthy half of the root with a hooked fork called a hacker, ..." Because it is piecework they have to work

through the rain: “There are degrees of dampness, and a very little is called being wet through in common talk. But to stand working slowly in a field, and feel the creep of rainwater, first in legs and shoulders, then on hips and head, then at back, front, and sides, and yet to work on ... demands a distinct modicum of stoicism, even of valour.”



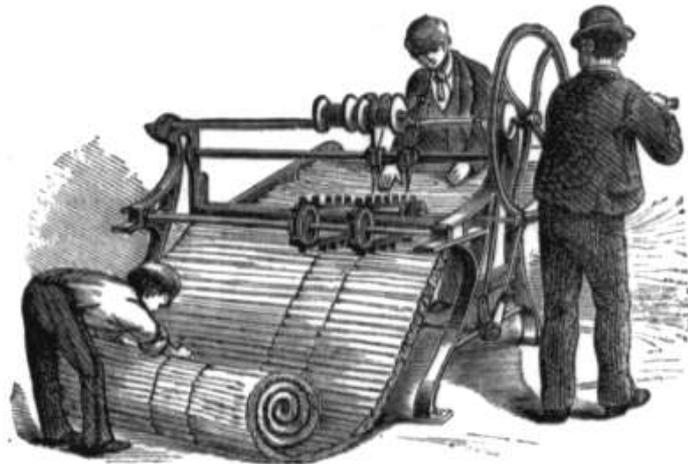
A woman at work in a turnip field, c. 1883. Photograph by the artist Sir George Clausen in the Museum of English Rural Life Collection, University of Reading (P DX805).

“When it was not swede-grubbing it was swede-trimming, in which process they sliced off the earth and fibres with a bill-hook before storing the roots for future use ... if it was frosty even their thick leather gloves could not prevent the frozen masses they handled from biting their fingers.” The effects of the swede work can be compared with the potato digging and weeding from Hardy’s famous poem *The ruined maid*:

Tired of digging potatoes,
And spudding up docks
... Your hands were like
Paws then, your face
Blue and black ...

When the snow comes and further work in the field is impossible, the women are moved to the wheat-barn for 'reed-drawing' [see image below], preparing straw for roof thatching, as in the second verse of the poem, "fearful hard work - worse than swede-hacking," says Marion. Putting on their gloves they set to work "in front of the press, an erection formed of two posts connected by a cross-beam, under which the sheaves to be drawn from were laid ears outward, the beam being pegged down by pins in the uprights, and lowered as the sheaves diminished." Again, they are only paid for what they do, so have to work on when exhausted, "seizing the ears of corn, drawing out the straw, gathering it under their arms, and cutting off the ears with their bill-hooks ... Then Tess suddenly flagged, and sank down upon the heap of wheat-ears at her feet ..."

But their labour in the field and the barn is partly ameliorated by their memories of happier times: "... They were talking of the time when they lived and loved together at Talbothays Dairy, that happy green tract of land where summer had been liberal in her gifts ... they lived all this afternoon in memories of green, sunny, romantic Talbothays."



A reed-drawing machine. Image from a catalogue dating from the 1880s by the agricultural engineering company, John Wallis Titt in the collections of Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading.

The dairy work in the third stanza of the poem is described as a seasonal variation rather than a memory of the past as in the novel. The novel's trajectory is towards the heroine's hopelessness and death, but the poem's development is quite different, giving the field women a more impersonal passage towards the delights of spring and summer. In fact, in the novel the scenes at Talbothays comprise about a quarter of the whole, from Chapter 16, and are the setting for Tess falling in love with Angel, who proposes marriage in the farm

dairy (“Possibly the Talbothays milk was not very thoroughly skimmed that afternoon.”) The specificity of daily life at the farm and the developing romance are very different to the more distilled, seasonal essence of the third verse of the poem, partly because the novel creates suspense from the courtship and draws out the specificity of the scenes accordingly – will they marry or not? The unspecified ‘rash’ behaviour of the poem is also different from the explicit rashness of Tess and Angel’s courtship in the novel, where the consequences of Tess’s withheld secrets are so far reaching (reaching to harsh, dreary Flintcomb-Ash and beyond), and so catastrophic. In the poem the rashness of love is the emotional culmination, the pleasure of sunshine after the harsh winter, rather than a stage in the development of personal tragedy.



A postcard of a milkmaid from the Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading.

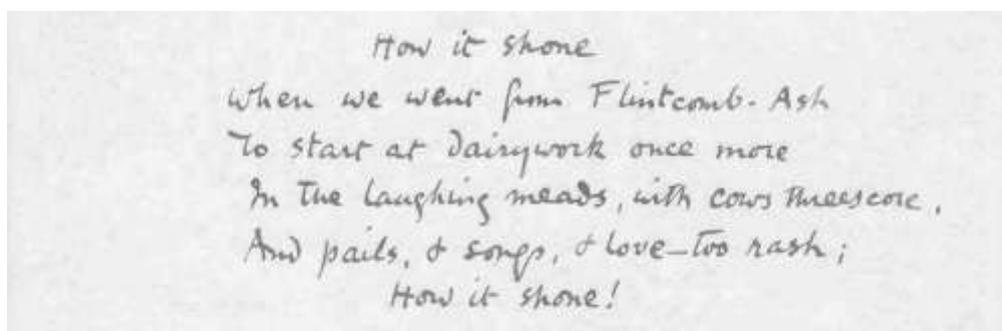
Life as a milkmaid is therefore considerably more pleasant than life at Flintcomb-Ash is going to be. “Dairyman Crick’s household of maids and men lived on comfortably, placidly, even merrily. Their position was perhaps the happiest of all positions in the social scale ...” The dairymaids live in the farmhouse and Tess and her friends Marion and Izz form a close bond of gossip and shared happiness in the small community - all three of them are infatuated with Angel. Although the milking work can sometimes start at three o’clock in the morning it is customary to take an afternoon nap of an hour to compensate, employment is more secure, and at times when the cows are with their calves there is even free time to be had from milking and cheese-making to walk and flirt in the sunshine.



Milking.

A photograph from the John Read Collection, Museum of English Rural Life, University of Reading.

In Hardy's introductory note to *Winter Words*, the volume in which this poem first appeared, he challenges criticism by reviewers of being "wholly gloomy and pessimistic" in his writing. It is therefore significant that a poem related to *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, a late novel much criticized on publication for its pessimism (or 'Tessimism' as it was called by one reviewer) is not in essence a gloomy one; and this may suggest a late dating for the poem – the events which are tragic in the fiction being given a more impersonal, composed and altogether happier cast in the poetry, the 'Tessimism' deliberately modulated. Partly because of the chronological re-ordering of the stanzas, when compared with the events in the novel, winter labour is seen as harsh but bearable, and the seasons culminate in the romance and sociability of spring and summer dairying: happy, optimistic, not to say ecstatic.



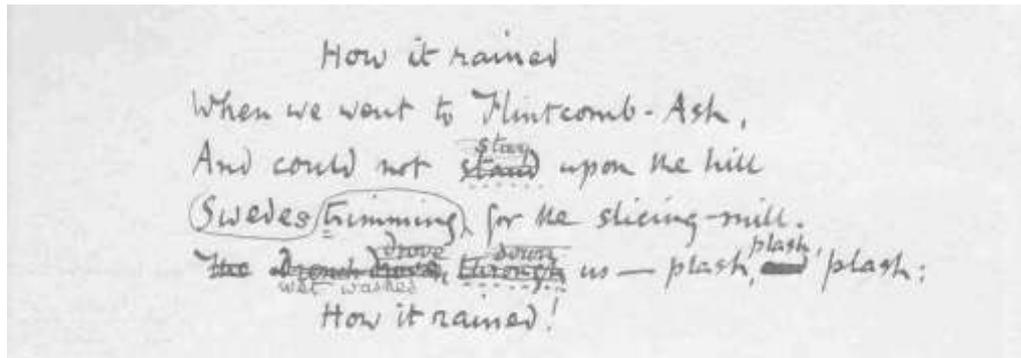
The last verse of the poem

The poem expresses Hardy's view of the 'impersonality' of the field women at work, subject to weather and nature, whereas in the novel the characters' lives are necessarily described in much more detail: "A field-man is a personality afield; a field-woman is a portion of the field; she has somehow lost her own margin, imbibed the essence of her surrounding, and assimilated herself with it." (Chapter 14). That too shows us how in retrospect Hardy tended to think of his character Tess as an 'essence' and a type. "She was no longer the milkmaid, but a visionary essence of woman - a whole sex condensed into one typical form." There is a sense in which Hardy was in love with his heroine Tess, as he said himself ("I have not been able to put on paper all that she is, or was, to me") and we probably need look no further than these feelings to find the inspiration for his poem.

Unfortunately, the poem's relationship with the novel doesn't really help with its dating. Some have claimed this poem was written contemporaneously with the novel, and it has even been suggested that it pre-dates the fiction, and could therefore be thought of as one strand of the novel's inspiration; unlikely as this seems. The most likely dating might seem to be the rather imprecise time between the first publication of *Tess* and when the verse for *Winter Words* came to be collected together and revised for publication, that is between 1891 and about 1925. The recently revealed watermark on the Reading MS dates the paper to 1916. Although we don't know whether this is a first draft, a date rather later than the publication of the novel, or the dramatic adaptation Hardy made of his story in 1894-5 seems possible, partly because of what might be thought its retrospective cast - the distillation of the emotion, looking back at the essence of Tess, the specificity of her prose tragedy adapted.

The material text

Qualities of Hardy's writing, demonstrated by this poem, were clarity and precision using ordinary language, but without sacrificing complexity of thought, emotional shading, or striking imagery. This wasn't achieved without time and industry, as he would regularly, sometimes obsessively, revise his poems. Many of them are difficult or impossible to date partly because of this process of re-working drafts at different times before publication. The first verse of the poem shows some of this work with its revisions and cancelled variants [see below].



The first verse of *We Field-Women*

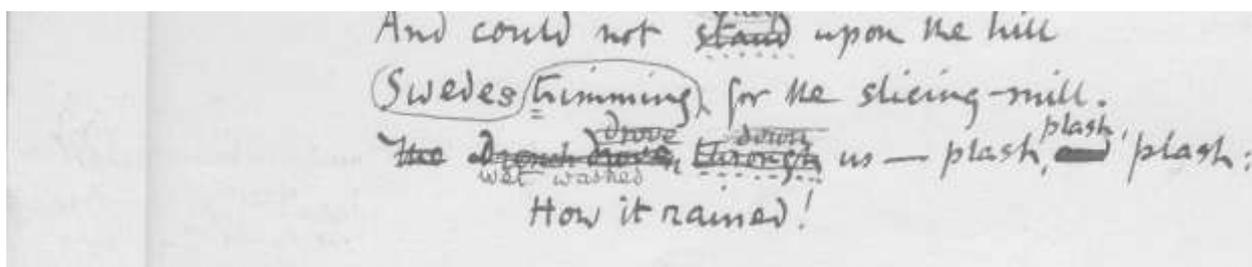
When Hardy came to collect poems together for a published volume he would compose new ones and revise older ones, sometimes giving the dates of original composition, sometimes not. *We Field-Women* was first published undated in his last, posthumously published volume *Winter Words*, gathered together and prepared for publication by his widow, Florence Hardy, and his friend Sydney Cockerell. The Reading corrected holograph of this poem, given by Hardy to his friend Howard Bliss at some point in the 1920s, incorporates a few revisions not present in the Oxford manuscript. Since the dates of the two manuscripts are a matter of conjecture, it is impossible to say which represents the final thoughts of the author. But whatever the difficulties of establishing a definitive text or a definite date, it is the re-workings of his poetry as well as the fair copies which can often be of interest, and the corrections in the Reading manuscript certainly give us an insight into Hardy's process of composition.

Since there are more revisions in the Reading than the Oxford version, it is possible that the Reading version is the earlier one, showing initial thoughts, and the Oxford version might be more of a fair copy, made perhaps when Hardy was gathering poems together for publication. For example, in line 4 of the Reading version the revision of 'Swedes trimming' to 'Trimming Swedes' might seem to be an obvious improvement on a first thought; and 'Wet washed through us' in line 5 seems an improvement on the original line which included the definite article.

We also see Hardy varying 'stand' in line 3 with 'stay' but then reverting to 'stand' to retain a stronger and more dramatic idea: the rain is so strong the women can't stand up to do their work. The change of 'plash, and plash' to 'plash, plash, plash', and the change from

'The Drench drove through us' to 'Wet washed through us' in line 5 could also be seen as examples of refining the poem's clarity and immediacy.

When, in order to assess its preservation needs, the manuscript was removed recently from the frame in which Gerald Finzi had placed it, what appears to be a further correction to the first verse, made in pencil but rubbed out, was noticed [see below]. Hardy would often make revisions in pencil. Unreadable by the naked eye, this mark is currently under investigation by the University's Centre for Advanced Microscopy to see if it can be deciphered.



The last four lines of the first verse. The faint erased pencil mark can be seen on the left-hand side.

Gerald Finzi

Hardy gave this manuscript to Howard Bliss (a friend who collected literary manuscripts) sometime after 1920 when he first got to know him. We do know that Bliss came to lunch with Hardy on 12 December 1924 as this is recorded by the poet in a notebook, and the gift was made either then or on another occasion. Most of Howard Bliss's collection of Hardy and other manuscripts is now at the University of Texas at Austin, but in 1956 the composer Gerald Finzi had written to Bliss asking for advice about a song setting he was composing of Hardy's poem *At Middle Field Gate in February*. The brother of Arthur Bliss, Howard was also a musician. As a result of this correspondence with Finzi, Bliss gave him the manuscript of *We Field-Women* in March 1956.

We will never know whether Finzi would have been encouraged by this gift to set *We Field-Women* to music as he was mortally ill at the time and was spending song composition time gathering together and completing past drafts and sketches. He died on 27 September of the same year, having finished six Hardy song settings in the last year of his life. He did say that there were a hundred more poems by Hardy which attracted him in addition to the fifty-two he did set.

It is true that this poem is one of those he'd marked in the contents list of one of his volumes of Hardy's poetry (*Collected Poems*, 1930). Joy Finzi confirmed that the marks are Gerald Finzi's annotations, which denote either poems he has set to music already or those he is considering. Alas, there appear to be no annotations to the text of the poetry itself in any of his Hardy volumes; which could have given significant insight into the process of setting Hardy's poetry to music, and indeed of setting twentieth century English poetry more generally. Vaughan Williams said that Finzi had found the 'musical equivalent' of English poetry.



The bookplate used in Gerald Finzi's library volumes.

It is notable that nearly all of Finzi's Hardy settings are for male voice, although at the end of his life he was apparently considering some female voice settings, which could well have included *We Field-Women*. The structure of the poem was undoubtedly one that would have appealed to him: movement in the last verse to a different level of intensity (AAB), rather than a progression (ABC) or a cyclical form (ABA) is again and again what Hardy wrote and what Finzi chose to set.

Finzi had an undoubted empathy with Hardy's view of the world. To pay his respects to the poet's memory he would often go walking in the 'Wessex' countryside, and in 1938 he bought Hardy's walking stick, although largely because he didn't think he could afford any of his books which were up for sale at the time. But in 1949 for his birthday Joy found a copy of Edmund Blunden's *The Waggoner*, a volume of poetry which had been owned by Hardy (and is now in the Finzi Book Room collection at Reading). Finzi wrote that the two people he loved most were his wife and Thomas Hardy.

The composer was particularly in sympathy with the poet's lack of moralising and his agnosticism, both of which it might be thought tend to mark Hardy out as an early

twentieth century voice, although his clarity of expression and avoidance of academic obscurity, interpreted by some as anti-modernism, perhaps do not. In that, however, is where his considerable influence on subsequent English poetry lies. Finzi is reported to have had an antipathy to T.S. Eliot and there is only one volume by Ezra Pound in his book collection. "I am very anxious not to be obscure," Hardy had said in 1920. "It is not fair to one's readers ... Some of the younger poets are too obscure." The *We Field-Women* manuscript, so proudly owned by Gerald Finzi, and demonstrating so clearly the beauty, clarity and integrity of Hardy's poetic vision, is now a treasured possession in the University's collections.

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