



English musicologist and critic Marion M. Scott witnessed an eclipse in April 1921 at “Egdon Heath,” a fictionalized place in Thomas Hardy country. Scott later wrote about her experience in a profile of composer Gustav Holst, who composed the tone poem “Egdon Heath” that he dedicated to Hardy. (Painting by David J. Tolley)

## Thomas Hardy, Gustav Holst the Heath, an Eclipse and Music

*A Saturday afternoon in November was approaching the time of twilight, and the vast tract of unenclosed wild known as Egdon Heath embrowned itself moment by moment. Overhead the hollow stretch of whitish cloud shutting out the sky was as a tent which had the whole heath for its floor.*

Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native*

**By David J. Tolley**

English novelist and poet Thomas Hardy produced a large body of work that has endured for a century and a half. His powerful novels stand out for their perception, understanding and compassion for women and their plight during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Hardy’s writing shocked Victorian sensibilities. He created a cast of memorable characters who have intrigued and repelled generations of readers.

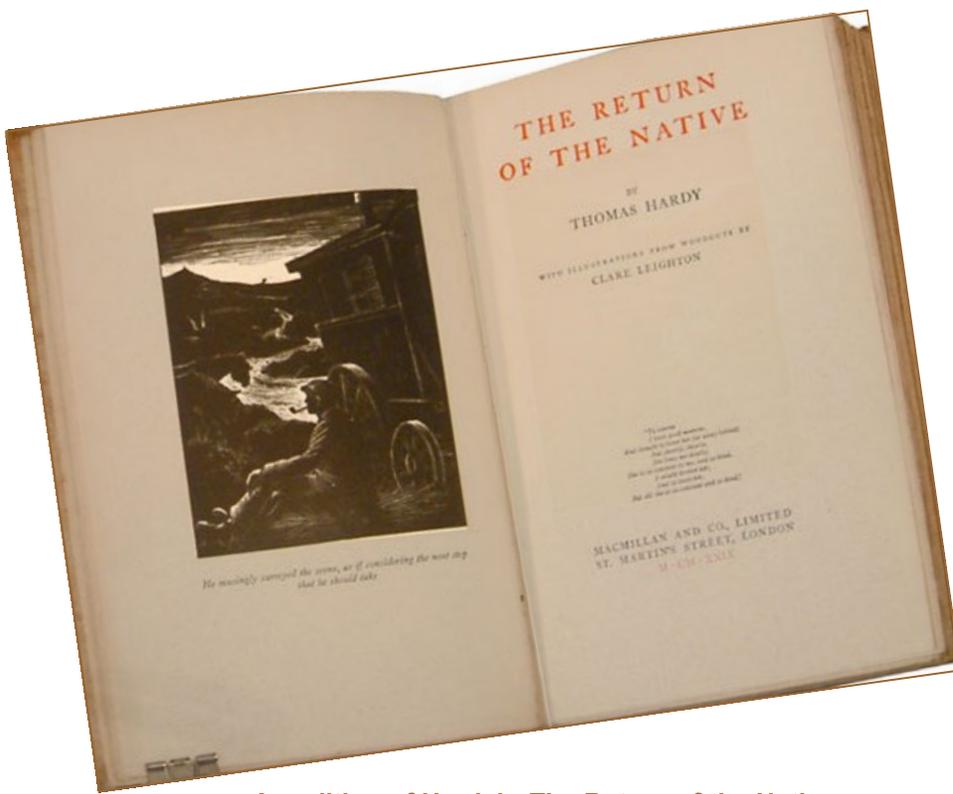
As important as his characters are to each narrative, there are two additional elements that make Hardy stand out – his compelling renderings of nature that often make place a character, and the evocative music of his highly visual

language, both in his poetry and prose.

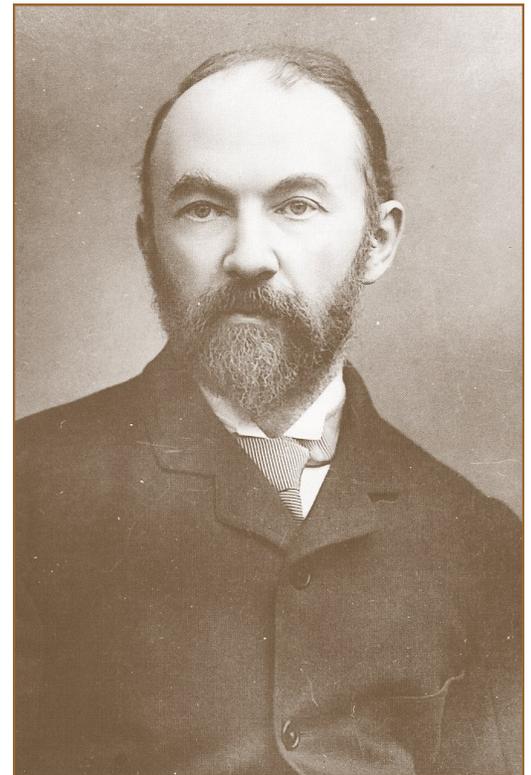
Music was very much a part of Hardy’s life, so it is fitting that many of his poems have been set to music by English composers, including Gerald Finzi, John Ireland, Robin Milford, Benjamin Britten and Gustav Holst.

My illustration arose from an account of a natural event on Dorset heathland experienced by English musicologist Marion M. Scott. Scott tied composer Holst and Hardy together in a most evocative way. Her description

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**An edition of Hardy's *The Return of the Native* illustrated by wood engraver Clare Leighton.**



**Novelist and poet Thomas Hardy**

captured my imagination. As a reader of Hardy, I have always been drawn more to his rendering of “Egdon Heath” in his novel *The Return of the Native* than to the fate of his main characters – Clym Yeobright, Eustacia Vye and Damon Wildevle.

Hardy’s “working of things external” on human outcomes often dealt with women -- Tess Durbeyfield and Eustacia Vye in particular. He influenced other writers to think more realistically and graphically about women. The Shropshire novelist Mary Webb followed his lead. Webb’s biographer Dr. Gladys Mary Coles perceptively noted that another tragic heroine, Hazel Woodus, in *Gone to Earth*, derives from Hardy’s influence.

Coles writes that Webb’s novel “most recalls those of Thomas Hardy,” citing comparison with Tess: “She has learned a great deal from Hardy in her use of rural superstition, country occupations and events, and her way of weaving her characters into their environment”. [1]

More than elsewhere in Hardy’s novels and stories, these elements are woven into *The Return of the Native* in which Wildevle and Miss Vye are diminished by Egdon Heath in ways that prove to be particularly overbearing to Eustacia.

Eustacia was not a “witch” as often suggested. She was a woman merely unsuited by background and temperament to her surroundings with her longing for the vibrant life of Paris -- hardly a venue for rural superstition. Egdon’s oppression is the described darkness in her life.

Wildevle apart, other characters appear unaffected by the surrounding heath, although references to Egdon frequently cite Hardy’s initial opening description of the heath stressing its enduring bleakness and immutability, likened by theatrical producer Eric Crozier to the heath of *King Lear*. [2]

From a quotation on the score’s title page, this sense clearly imposed itself on Gustav Holst, who was inspired to compose *Egdon Heath* regarded by many, including his friend, the composer Ralph Vaughan Williams, as his finest composition.

Initially unpopular with some orchestras, the bleakness of tone could be regarded as “dreary and unpleasing” – a term first used in 1773 by Dorset historian John Hutchins to describe the heathland.

Even today among Holst’s compositions *Egdon Heath* is not frequently performed, recordings are few, although the work is often used as background music on Wessex subjects. There are currently nine recordings of *Egdon Heath* available compared with 88 of Holst’s *The Planets*.

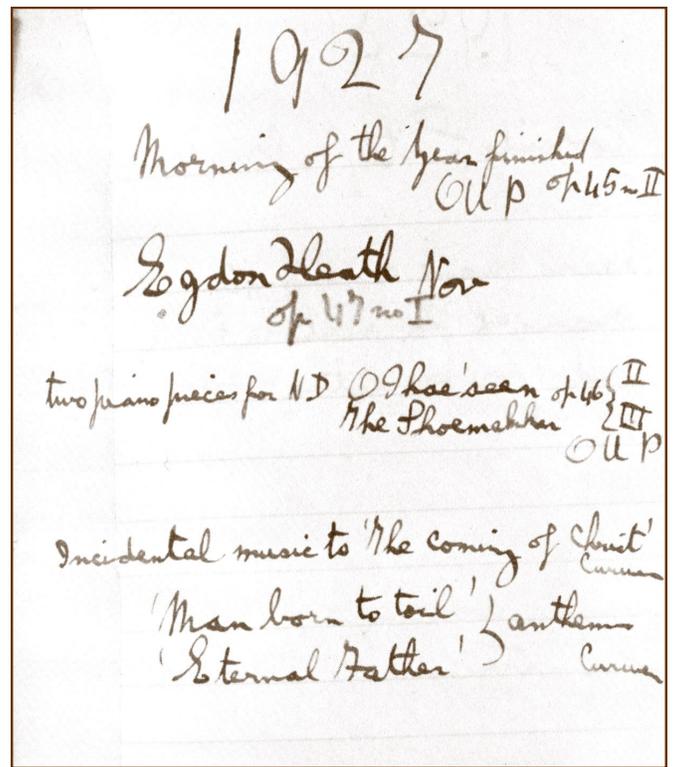
In a letter dated 11 August 1926 from the Phoenix Hotel, Dorchester, Holst wrote to his American friend Austin Lidbury, commenting that his gift of Hardy’s novel “...combined with a walk over Egdon Heath at Easter 1926 started my mind working”. [3]

Holst confirmed that at Easter 1927 he received a cable from the New York Symphony Society asking him to write

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**Composer Gustav Holst noted the completion of *Egdon Heath* in his journal in 1927.**



“something” for them. “Something” became the tone poem *Egdon Heath*, completed by July, 1927.

Although Holst dedicated the work to him, Hardy died a few days before the first performance. *Egdon Heath* premiered on February 12, 1928 in New York City with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony Orchestra. The following day Holst conducted the English premiere in his native Cheltenham.

The performance was attended by Hardy’s widow Florence Hardy, who was moved to write to the poet and memoirist Siegfried Sassoon that the work was

*“...wonderful but it was almost too much for me – afterwards Gustav Holst took my arm & walked up & down the empty corridors with me. The music was his tribute to TH & a beautiful one ”.*[4]

Holst’s familiarity with the novel was relatively recent. On April 8, 1921, six years *before* the composition of *Egdon Heath*, English musicologist and critic Marion Scott visited Wareham Heath, then typical of Dorset heathlands. There she witnessed an annular solar eclipse that made so profound an impression on her that in 1944, she recounted her experience in an article about Holst, marking the tenth anniversary of his premature death in 1934.

In *Holst, Cotswold Man and Mystic*, she linked her memory of the event with the Holst’s tone poem and Hardy’s novel. (*The Listener* 18<sup>th</sup> May 1944). Scott wrote:

*“Egdon Heath] was of all others the one that Holst was surest about himself, and his tone-picture of Egdon Heath considered with an open mind, comes extraordinarily close to Hardy’s description of “a place of... singularly colossal and mysterious in its swarthy monotony.” But even more than to Hardy, I think Holst cast back to the Egdon Heath of pre-history.*

*I once had the fortune to see Egdon (Wareham Heath) under its primeval aspect. An eclipse of the sun fell that year on a spring morning. Sitting at the edge of the Heath with a friend I watched the birds and insects flitting over the winter-brown bracken and green bog-moss in bright sunlight. Silently the cheerful day dimmed; it grew so still we hardly dared speak; the great expanses of the Heath turned livid, and in the uncanny light of that darkness the world of pre-history welled up from the earth and possessed the landscape, cruel because unaware of feeling, inhuman because without sense of right and wrong. That to me is Holst’s Egdon.*["[5]

The overbearing background of “the heath” that so impressed Holst and Scott has been recognised by others. The human dwellers are reduced almost to the level of a Greek dramatic template as Hardy biographer Professor Michael Millgate has observed, and clearly contains elements drawn from Hardy’s own life, notably the difficult Mrs Yeobright.

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Another authority, author and radio broadcaster Desmond Hawkins, further commented that her son Clym who, like Hardy, was native of the heath, was untroubled by it.

Apart from the well-known opening, *The Return of the Native* has been subject to various criticisms not relevant here, but certainly the novel has clearly had a wider influence than has been credited, with several American connections.

Although the subject of the work was not specifically commissioned by the New York Symphony Orchestra, it owes a debt to Holst's American friend Austin Lidbury, and seems to have created a largely positive response in the United States. The first performance was prefaced by readings from *The Return of the Native*. New York Times critic Olin Downes found the work somewhat elusive on a first hearing.

Among those who found much to like in the novel was the onetime formidable boss of the New York Yankees, George Steinbrenner. Steinbrenner had once written a college paper on Hardy heroines, and in giving an interview about a controversial player, was prompted to declare unqualified admiration for Eustacia Vye, "*Hardy's most vivid creation*"

Despite its singular elements, *The Return of the Native* is rather undervalued, and little represented by modern media which, given the common passion for reinterpreting authors' works, is probably a blessing.

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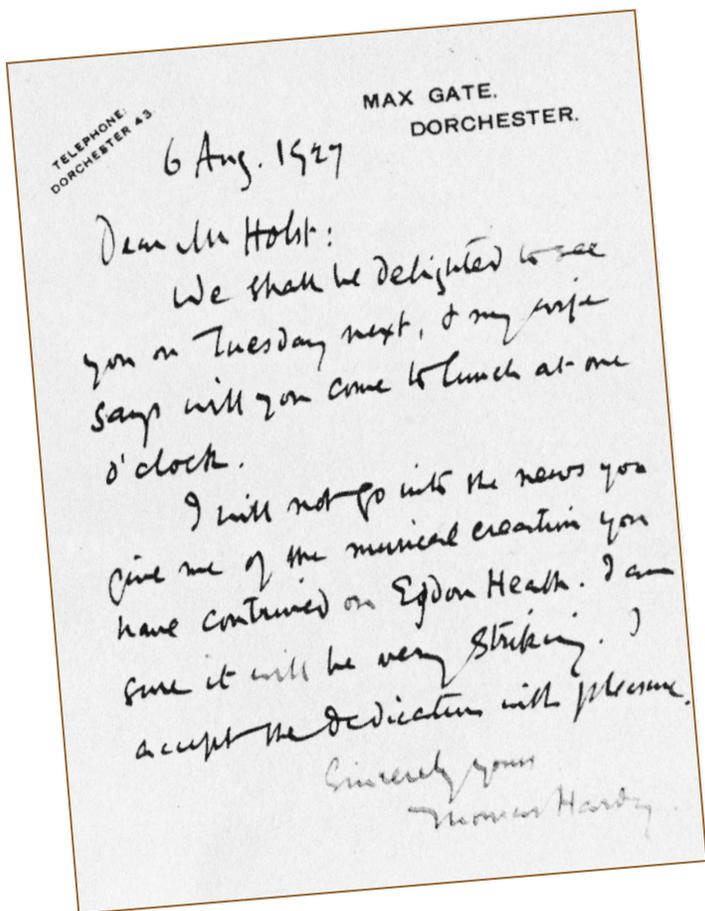
**Marion M. Scott who witnessed the eclipse on "Egdon Heath" left an evocative record of the event.**

**(Photo Pamela Blevins Collection)**



**Stoborough Heath near Wareham Heath today. "...the sky was as a tent which had the whole heath for its floor."**

**(Photo: David J. Tolley)**



**A letter from Thomas Hardy to Gustav Holst inviting him to lunch.**

Apart from a BBC radio dramatisation by the late Desmond Hawkins, *The Return of the Native* has not been well served by the media, although in 1973 Granada dramatised the Holst visit to Max Gate in its Parade arts series, assisted by Bill and Vera Jesty of the Thomas Hardy Society, with Rula Lenska as Eustacia Vye. This production has not proved traceable to date.

*Egdon Heath* was inspired by Holst's personal reaction to walking on Dorset heathland and influenced by his reading of Hardy's opening, although at one point a human element is suggested by a short folksong-like passage, perhaps representing the heath's small community.

No less poetic, Scott's account lays more stress on the natural world. The event she describes has a final coincidence: in Book 3, Part 4 of the novel *Clym Yeobright* and Eustacia have their fateful romantic assignation on the heath under an eclipse – this time of the Moon.

Nowhere else in Hardy does Nature impose itself in such degree.

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**Notes**

- [1] Gladys M. Coles *Mary Webb* [Seren Books ] ISBN 1-85411-034-9/1-85411035-7
- [2] Eric Crozier, Promenade pre-concert talk on the origins and background to Holst's *Egdon Heath* [undated] Recording in writer's possession. The most substantial account of the Holst visit to Hardy has been a programme with contributions by Colin Matthews and Furse Swann.
- [3] All correspondence entries [*et seq*] kindly provided by Colin Matthews, Holst Foundation.
- [4] Ibid.
- [5] Marion M. Scott, "Holst, Cotswold Man and Mystic," *The Listener*, 18 May, 1944. Manuscript in the Scott Archive, the Royal College of Music, London.

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David Tolley is a retired accounts manager whose interests range from the environment, conservation and history to drama, music and films.

In the past he has written for the Thomas Hardy and Ralph Vaughan Williams societies in England and has been published in a variety of English Journals and in the Congressional Record in the USA.

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