

Souvenirs & Mementos

This time the mementos are not mine, but those of the poet, Thomas Hardy. I never tasted Dorset or Schweppes “cyder”, never visited Weymouth, never danced with ladies in London, and in the spring of 1978 the true meaning of love was still unknown to me. “Great Things” was the first 20th-century poem featured in “Shorter Poems” (1932), a volume published by The T. Eaton Co. of Toronto, edited by Prof. W. J. Alexander. Its “new age” exuberance paralleled what I felt as I was about to complete high school and the Royal Conservatory of Music (Toronto).

Sadly, that exuberance soon disappeared when I began my studies at the University of Toronto, Faculty of Music. Thus, “Great Things,” the last of my youthful compositions, remained unfinished. Anything written between 1978 and 1985, was merely an assignment, a classroom exercise, or failed attempt to conform to the modernist idiom.

“Great Things” (1917) is a paraphrase of “wine, women, and song.” Hardy wrote of “cider, dance, and love.” The poem is both hedonistic and nostalgic, recalling the poet’s bicycle trips from Max Gate in Dorchester to Weymouth, with stops for cider at The Old Ship Inn, a 17th-century pub in Upwey. Hardy also featured it in one of his novels.



The Old Ship Inn, Upwey (c.1910), is on the left side.

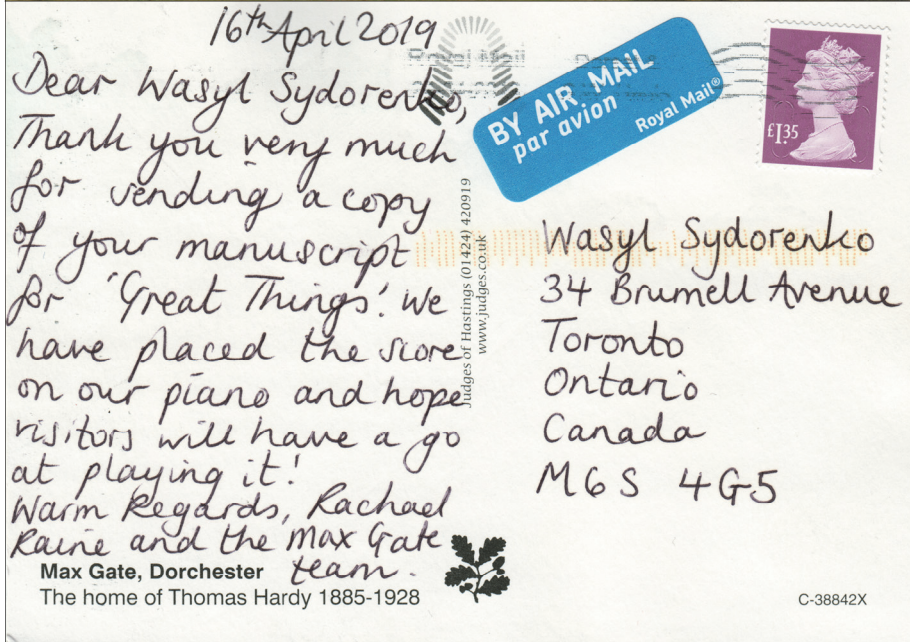


Thomas Hardy (c.1899) and his Rover bicycle on which he used to “spin” down to Weymouth.

In my mind, “Great Things” is imbued with the spirit of the ragtime era. I had heard the soundtrack of “The Sting” in high school, but did not fully comprehend the genre until much later. Since then, I have written “Eugenia Rag” (1988) and “Catalpa Blossoms” (2007). Now, I add this “ragtime” song to my list of completed works. With “Great Things,” I close a great chapter in my life, and open another...

I have decided to dedicate this song to a wonderful neighbour, Dorothy Jackson. She endorsed my plan to revisit my early works and rescue them from oblivion and took great delight when I received a thank-you note from Queen Elizabeth II for my “Red Carpet March.” When the Queen became the longest reigning monarch in British history, September 9, 2015, we drank a toast to Her Majesty—“God save the Queen! Long may she reign!” But, it wasn’t cider that we drank, it was Baileys Irish Cream.

After finishing the song I decided to send copies to The Old Ship Inn (Upwey), the Dorset County Museum, the Thomas Hardy Society, and Max Gate (the former home of the poet, now an historical site). Soon I received a wonderful postcard from the curator of Max Gate—Rachael Raine. I was deeply moved by the honour bestowed upon my oeuvre—that it was placed upon the piano of the home for guests to enjoy playing. In a way, I find this honour as surreal as the prescient poem Thomas Hardy himself wrote about his home—“The Strange House.” Could he have heard “Great Things” being played on some new instrument, yet unbroken—out of time and out of place? At the very least, may the joyous spirit of the song, of summers long gone by, of bicycle rides to the sea, soirées and midnight dances, sparkling cider, and love eternal... infuse the lives of both the visitors and the spirits of Max Gate.



Thomas Hardy
The Strange House
 (Max Gate, A.D. 2000)

“I hear the piano playing—
 Just as a ghost might play.”
 “—O, but what are you saying?
 There’s no piano to-day;
 Their old one was sold and broken;
 Years past it went amiss.”
 “—I heard it, or shouldn’t have spoken:
 A strange house, this!

“I catch some undertone here,
 From some one out of sight.”
 “—Impossible; we are alone here,
 And shall be through the night.”
 “—The parlour-door—what stirred it?”
 “—No one: no soul’s in range.”
 “—But, anyhow, I heard it,
 And it seems strange!

“Seek my own room I cannot—
 A figure is on the stair!”
 “—What figure? Nay, I scan not
 Any one lingering there.
 A bough outside is waving,
 And that’s its shade by the moon.”
 “—Well, all is strange! I am craving
 Strength to leave soon.”

“—Ah, maybe you’ve some vision
 Of showings beyond our sphere;
 Some sight, sense, intuition
 Of what once happened here?
 The house is old; they’ve hinted
 It once held two love-thralls,
 And they may have imprinted
 Their dreams on its walls?

“They were—I think ’twas told me—
 Queer in their works and ways;
 The teller would often hold me
 With weird tales of those days.
 Some folk can not abide here,
 But we—we do not care
 Who loved, laughed, wept, or died here,
 Knew joy, or despair.”