GERALD
MONSMAN

JOHN TREVENA

HIS WEST COUNTRY NOVELS

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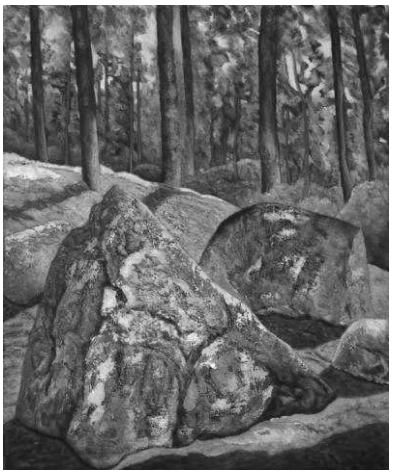
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This one

is for

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An Monsman
Dartmoor Forest Rocks

“All your pictures are silent poems.”

Unknown Ancient Roman Author.

JOHN TREVENA: HIS WEST COUNTRY NOVELS

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PREFACE

Ernest George Henham (1870–1948), writing both under his own name and with the pseudonym of "John Trevena," has until now been a "lost" writer, yet of remarkable achievement; indeed, he is a writer of greater range and power than any other West Country author with the possible exception of the more celebrated Thomas Hardy–who remains very much in print. Nevertheless, Henham/ Trevena also is surely a masterfulEnglish language novelist and a cultural figure of courage and vision, responding to social, political, and religious change with insight and contestation. I say it with reluctance–and I say this despite the marvelous additions brought to the literary canon by feminist and minority studies specialists–but with the exception of new women writers or writers belonging to specific cultural groups, our academic media during my career have been reluctant to swerve more than two or three points to the right or left of figures that have caught the eye of the intellectual *fashionistas*. But the literary canon is potentially more fluid than our readership assumes, and the consensus that rules the period of English literature in transition (1880–1920) should be open to greater debate than it is. Of course, simple newness can be mere faddishness and shaky claims of novelty may drive out firmer ones, but this should not promote canon-induced rigor mortis.

As the first book-length monograph on Henham/Trevena in eighty years, *John Trevena: His West Country Novels* focuses in particular on his Dartmoor fiction and its connection to his personal life. Given his prolific output of some twenty-seven novels–as well as a volume on wild flowers and numerous short stories and essays–this critique does not pretend to be exhaustively inclusive. Its purpose is to reintroduce his writings to renewed critical consideration, and its method is selective discussion of his best Dartmoor fiction. It will combine the original response to his novels with new biographical facts that bolster insight into his authorial intent, applying a methodology that puts the Dartmoor sceneswithin the context of wider literary, historical, and political-social developments. While early twentieth-century reviewers tended

a bit more than current ones to take to heart Thumper's father's advice that "if you can't say something nice, don't say nothing at all," their opinions of Henham/Trevena are anything but faint praise. Indeed, one impetus for extending this study to book-length was my desire to understand how such world-class evaluations could belong to a writer who appears to merit only footnote status in the most exhaustive surveys of English literature.

After situating his works within their literary period, the next two chapters are devoted to his life and bifurcated career as Henham/Trevena, including discussion of one novel from among his earlier fiction. (And since this is the first attempt to write a critical biography, for the sake of further investigation some primary source documentation is supplied here at greater length than may be customary.) The chapters following will undertake a chronological analysis of eight novels between 1906 and 1913 in which the focus will be: first, on his fiction's reception and the biographical issues of his literary craft; second, on the narrative patterns and ideational content of his works in the very widest possible sense of Aristotle's *mythos*– the specific incidents and the author's rendering of motives and effects. Trevena is a complexly subtle thinker and these "readings" of his fiction are preliminary and by no means all-inclusive–exploratory"sallies of the mind" in a quest for an understanding that is ongoing.

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CHAPTER 1

THE CASE FOR TREVENA

One of the pleasures for readers of late-Victorian and Edwardian novels is the abundance of neglected texts to be discovered–that, and the opportunity of reintroducing their forgotten authors to a wider critical discourse. Varying social and political contexts produce differing constructions of value and those which one era embraces, the next to its imaginative impoverishment may ignore. One thinks of the droll response of T. E. Brown, the regional Manx poet, upon being told late in life by a sympathetic friend that he "had been omitted from a list of minor writers of the Victorian period. Brown smiled and said, 'Perhaps I am among the major'" (Tobias 12). On the Isle of Man there would be no irony or wistfulness found in this riposte. But elsewhere the relentless pursuit of the currently fashionable has left Brown, like John Trevena, ignored. A leap of the historical imagination is required to hark back to Trevena's early twentieth-century preoccupations, to appreciate his fierce humanitarianism, his iconoclasm in religious feelings, his sense of nature's beauty and cruelty, and his poetic response to life's tragedies. Trevena's novels may well be ideal candidates for reclamation. Might they not, if rediscovered, generate a classic richness and diversity of interpretation?

The time is right–ambitious though it may seem–to argue that he deserves to be read alongside his more famous West Country compatriot, Thomas Hardy, although Trevena is the more-recondite writer. Trevena's use of the land as a metaphor of its people, a place of the mind as well as a topography that is real, has an originality all its own. Samuel Dibble asserted that "When it comes to analyzing provincial England with its multiplicity of conflicting characteristics and traits that have come down through centuries of varying civilizations, it is probable Mr. Trevena has no equal" (4). The only previous book-length study of Trevena's work has been an able but limited-circulation dissertation some eighty years ago; however, in the meantime newer interpretive methodol-

ogies have been forged, better able to make sense of Trevena if carefully applied. As an opportunity for innovative canon revision, a new study analyzing the artistic handling of his thematic materials will add a new "intellectual novelist" to the canon.

So how–specifically–does one begin to make the case for John Trevena*redivivus*? Essentially, he is a regional novelist whose work, set among the Dartmoor valleys and rocky hilltops, exhibits a strong feel for social customs and realistic dialogue. Not every writer's representation of local life and landscape has appeal and excellence, of course; some are mediocre productions goosed up with over-zealous applications of regional color. The most praiseworthy regional novels, as we currently know them, probably hark back to Maria Edgeworth and Sir Walter Scott. Many other regional works of the nineteenth century, such as those by Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Kingsley, and the Brontës also belong among the most successful in that genre, as well as Thomas Hardy'sWessex novels that have the closest affinity with Trevena's writings–particularly Hardy's vision of nature's resistless power and cruelties. This regional tradition has remained vital throughout the last century as well–James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, or William Faulkner and his Southern compatriots; not to mention that rapidly growing part of the literary landscape in our twenty-first century, black and ethnic urban writing. What W. B. Yeats defined in "Synge and Ireland" as the Celtic achievement of his Irish countryman's plays may be said of Trevena also: "He loves all that has edge, all that is salt in the mouth, all that is rough to the hand, all that heightens the emotions by contest, all that stings into life the sense of tragedy. . . . Synge, like all of the great kin, sought for the race, not through the eyes or in history, or even in the future, but where those monks found God, in the depths of the mind" (326-327, 341). Such an ethos may be discovered either in rural or urban environments–Trevena's tended to be rural, the folk living amidst the "cleaves" and "tors" of Dartmoor. J. M. Synge's "depths of the mind" or the "inmost consciousness" of the Manx which Brown had taken as his theme–a race that, despite Brown's love of his people, he finds tainted by human fallenness–this also is Trevena's theme.

Thomas Hardy may have provided a preliminary insight into the value of regional fiction when he wrote that novels such as

his *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) were meant to be "a fairly true record of a vanishing life" (Hardy, General Preface). Such cultural "life," Sir Edward Burnett Tylor said, was the "complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (1:1). In *Heather* (1908) Trevena wrote:

> The present inhabitants are our subject; the last dregs of the folk, still ignorant and primitive, who are being killed like the Red Indians by the civilisation which has for a long time surrounded and is now breaking over them, driving out the old, bringing in the new, ringing out the age of mettle, of muscle, sinew, and simplicity, and heralding the age of skill, brains, and trickery. Bigbones has finished his reign and must go to the wall against which he has been wont to push Littlebones. Evolution stays for nothing; first vegetation, then reptiles, then mammals, and now brains. The age of cunning has begun; and God help the giant." (29)

Put simply, Trevena's theme is the comedy and tragedy of the Bronze Age confronting modernity. He was sensitive to what today we call a "third space" or a borderland threshold–in this instance an ancient, all-but-independent Duchy confronting trains, electricity, and novel ideologies. Writers living on such temporal and spatial borders have a firsthand opportunity to instruct and enliven by detailing the processes of cultural interchange. As do cultural studies of other human societies, Trevena's fiction emphasizes unique interpersonal and intergroup relations, those antagonisms and connections effectively focused through the passions of love and similar catastrophes.

Behind the human comedy of Trevena's Dartmoor were the Wessex novels of Thomas Hardy–originally controversial, but clearly and deservedly now canonical, integral to an appreciation of England's rural heritage. Yet in depicting the vagaries of humans and nature, Hardy is almost cinematically visual compared with Trevena who utilizes two different descriptive techniques: an intimately psychological presentation of character reflecting the emerging complexities of consciousness in modern fiction (a foreshadowing of Virginia Woolf's "luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope" of an "unknown and uncircumscribed

spirit"[189]) and, offsetting this, a satire of the buffooneries of the Dartmoor rustics, a comedy that looks both back to the eccentric personages of Charles Dickens or the self-satirizing of Charles Lamb in "A Dissertation Upon Roast Pig"–and also, as likely as not, ahead to darker human defects in post-modernism. Pertaining to such eccentrics, Willum and Ann Cobbledick are the starring oddities in *A Pixy in Petticoats* (1906), precursors to Peter and Mary Tavy in Trevena's *Furze the Cruel* (1907). Even so, in terms of these agricultural and village rustics, neither Thomas Hardy's Wessex nor Trevena's Dartmoor presents formalized local color figures, as in a Greek chorus or, sometimes, among Shakespeare's "clowns." Across the repertoire of Trevena's many different sorts of narratives–playful, historical, dramatic, psychological–his authentic figures of broad comedy give zest and ebullience to the narrative, even when edged with horrific or tragic possibilities. *Furze the Cruel* and most of his West Country novels are a kind of ethnography or informal social anthropology emphasizing, like cultural studies of other human societies, unique interpersonal and intergroup relations, the "inmost" social connections.

Hardy's essay "The Dorsetshire Labourer" in *Longman's Magazine* (July, 1883) indicts genteel society for supposing agricultural workers are uniformly alike. "Hodge" was Hardy's personification for the sort of backward rustic laborer that many assumed any West Country visitor would encounter:

> This supposed real but highly conventional Hodge is a degraded being of uncouth manner and aspect, stolid understanding, and snail-like movement. His speech is such a chaotic corruption of regular language that few persons of progressive aims consider it worth while to enquire what views, if any, of life, of nature, or of society, are conveyed in these utterances. . . . But living on there for a few days the sojourner would . . . find that the language, instead of being a vile corruption of cultivated speech, was a tongue with a grammatical inflection rarely disregarded by his entertainer, though his [host's] children would occasionally make a sad hash of their talk. Dick the carter, Bob the shepherd, and Sam the ploughman, are, it is true, alike in the narrowness of their means and their general open-air life; but they cannot be rolled together again into such a Hodge as [the visitor] dreamt of, by any possible enchantment.

Like Hodge, Trevena's characters lived in England's southwest counties, Dorset, Devon, and Cornwall, areas of lower wages, loosely knit social networks, and coldly impersonal interactions between employers and workers. And like Hardy, Trevena insists upon the richness of their personal variations. The identity of both authors' characters typically is rooted in the landscape; they are vivid, unique, tied to place, true to their heritage–although Trevenaseems acutely aware of a lost sea-going glory. Hardy, too, comments on this decline of Dorset from its robust past:

> During the centuries of serfdom, of copyholding tenants, and down to twenty or thirty years ago, before the power of unlimited migration had been clearly realised, the husbandman of either class had the interest of long personal association with his farm. The fields were those he had ploughed and sown from boyhood, and it was impossible for him, in such circumstances, to sink altogether the character of natural guardian in that of hireling. . . . A depopulation is going on which in some quarters is truly alarming. Villages used to contain, in addition to the agricultural inhabitants, an interesting and better-informed class, ranking distinctly above those–the blacksmith, the carpenter, the shoemaker, the small higgler, the shopkeeper (whose stock-in-trade consisted of a couple of loaves, a pound of candles, a bottle of brandy-balls and lumps of delight, three or four scrubbing-brushes, and a frying-pan), together with nondescript-workers other than farm-labourers, who had remained in the houses where they were born for no especial reason beyond an instinct of association with the spot. . . . The occupants who formed the back-bone of the village life have to seek refuge in the boroughs. This process, which is designated by statisticians as "the tendency of the rural population towards the large towns," is really the tendency of water to flow uphill when forced. The poignant regret of those who are thus obliged to forsake the old nest can only be realised by people who have witnessed it–concealed as it often is under a mask of indifference. (252-269)

As a spectator of contemporary Dartmoor life, John Trevena's intention is not merely to describe the "cruel" land or to chronicle its rural poor, but to show how the landscape is formative of the inhabitants' life-traits and souls. Little did Trevena realize, during his early Canadian phase, how close he came to Hardy's

expedient use of materials taken from the landscape for writing: Hardy "could meditate on his subject as he walked in congenial surroundings on the heath or in the neighbouring woods, jotting down his thoughts, sometimes, when he had no scrap of paper with him, on 'large dead leaves, white chips left by the wood-cutters, or pieces of stone or slate that came to hand'; he had found that 'when he carried a pocket-book his mind was barren as the Sahara'" (Pinnion 111). Trevena recalls that crossing Lake Winnipeg his steamer put in to take on wood: "As it was an evil habit in those days to compose sonnets dedicated to Althea, Chloe, and other damsels of a youthful fancy, my object in wandering from the lakeside was to replenish my stocks of 'paper' by visiting the birch-trees which grew so abundantly in that region, and supplied me with thin sheets of bark-fibre admirably adapted for purposes of literature" (*Adventures*14). Hardy's and Trevena's writing materials represent a materialization of artistic creation that emphasizes their authors' connection to the surrounding natural world, almost as one encounters it in William Blake's "Introduction" to *Songs of Innocence* in which the poet "pluck'd a hollow reed / And I made a rural pen, / And I stain'd the water clear, / And I wrote my happy songs."

But nature, including human nature, is full of brutal experience and man is both complicitous in, and a victim of, harmful forces oblivious to his innocence or guilt. In Thomas Hardy's meditations on natural evils, his "purblind Doomsters" are the consequences of fickle fortune in a world ruled by a Will not merely indifferent, but unjust, morally blind, even cruelly mocking. In Trevena's *Furze the Cruel*, Abel Cain Weevil, the foster-father of Boodles, calls this power "the Brute." The Brute as the personification of cruelty, whether the intentional bullying of the destitute and weak by the villagers or the instinctive, amoral rabbit hunting of Aubrey's dog, is the existential givenness of facticity, source of all sadness. But one should not read Trevena's pessimism as indebtedness to Thomas Hardy nor, more radically, a bow to Arthur Schopenhauer's bleak philosophy that finds all human hopes fatally infected by a metaphysical hostility beyond nature, nor even to such concurrent movements as Naturalism or a dawning Nihilism that explain the indifference of the universe as a cosmic irony. Myrtle Henry, who corresponded with Trevena, said

he considered Hardy "a pessimist; and apart from the fact that he had not read Hardy when the critics began calling him a Hardy disciple, he does not feel that the charge of pessimism can often be brought against him" (15).

One critic, summarizing Trevena's career, amusingly described his output as "written with much care and a most uncomfortable amount of knowledge of unpleasant things" ("Brief Notes" *7). The accent of Trevena's literary vision rests upon a profound sense that man can neither reach spiritual salvation by his own reason nor attain to happiness by his own agenda. Yet at the same time, because nature has so many facets and faces, he refuses to limit by denial the possibility of some unknown harmony resembling ordinances of the *Logos* within the flux of things and thoughts. In Trevena, the discords of a *diabolic* state of nature (Gk *dyo* two >*dia-* across, apart + *ballein* to throw) seem mystically balanced by a *symbolic* capacity to envision order (*syn/m-* together + *ballein*), the broken and "thrown apart" is made whole in and through a glimpse of the Transcendent that "throws together." Though in a poem, "To the Unknown God" (its original title is in Greek), even Hardy saw the Will growing "percipient with advance of days" and old wrongs "dying as of self-slaughter," yet more forcefully in Trevena than in Hardy the evolution of human consciousness may be pressing toward some paradise regained.

John Trevena began his writing career under his own name, Ernest Henham, with fiction such as *Tenebrae: A Novel* (1898) in the Gothic style of E. A. Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." But he reinvented both his style and career at the time of his anonymously published *A Pixy in Petticoats* (1906), a narrative of romance and legend neither grotesque nor decadent which proved popular in the United States as well as England. Trevena was very self-consciously *re*starting his career with this anonymous debut of *Pixy*. Thereafter, his novels were published under the pseudonym "John Trevena." Factual data on Henham/Trevena's career is scarce, but chapters two and three will flesh out a portrait of the man such as may enhance appreciation of his work, suggesting that the adoption of a pseudonym, which roughly coincided with his return from Canada to Devonshire's Dartmoor, was the major turning point in his career. At this time also his chronic respiratory ailment had worsened; elevated particulate levels caused reduced

lung function and for Trevena triggered a chronic tubercular infection. He required the fresh air of higher elevations and avoidance of smoky industrial pollution, the "open-air treatment" mentioned in *Pixy* (41). Although the first of his consumptive protagonists, in *God, Man, and the Devil* (1897), went to Canada, all the others suffering from this disease go to Dartmoor. Even though it would be a mistake, certainly, to regard his Henham-era novels as lacking literary value, the later work, centered mainly in the Dartmoor area of Okehampton, is clearly of greatest significance. From first-hand experience Trevena portrays this area–part of the Duchy of Cornwall since 1240–as a uniquely diverse environment of rainy, wind-sweep moors and bogs, rivers, fields, neolithic ruins, farms with drunken farmers and villages with more drunks, and everywhere ineffectual vicars, enigmatic social customs, and dark superstitions. What especially adds to Trevena's forceful characterizations may have been his experiences in the colonial surroundings of Canada that stirred his sympathy for the native North Americans, making him particularly aware of the abject and destitute conditions of the local inhabitants on Dartmoor. It has been noted that social development within the colonies outstripped the British homeland by erasing the locked-down class system–one instantly sees the truth of this in the empire romances of Haggard, Mitford, or Glanville. Yet Trevena despised the weaknesses of the Dartmoor inhabitants; and like the rocks which give *Granite*(1909) its title, the author is devoid of any sentimental pity and can be as ruthless as fate itself. His tone is grimly grey; his humor, often bitter.

One suspects Trevena's health-enforced intention was to outstrip the popular regional novelist of the West Country, Eden Phillpotts, whose well-received *Children of the Mist* (1898) and other novels were in those days in high favor. Both Trevena and Phillpotts chronicle provincial lifeways more pagan than Christian, where inessentials give way in the face of nature to the intense elemental issues of birth, love, hate, death. In connection with the moorland setting, both also had, as was noted, "the slow, unhurried method, the digression to linger with Nature, the quaint and queer types of humanity that throng their pages" (Colbron 327; "Novels" 652). But if each waxed poetic at times, Trevena accented the harrowing and elegiac whereas Phillpotts tended toward the benign

and cheerful. Professor Frederic Taber Cooper's comparison in 1912 is finally the most effective:

> in each that same artistic sense of . . . the wonderful softness of nature, seen through a shimmering haze of English sunshine, or a slanting veil of English rain. But when it comes to the human life in the stories, one feels at once how radically far apart these two authors really are. Both of them picture a phase of the English peasantry; . . . the portraiture of each is a fine example of honest and unsparing realism. And yet the difference between these two authors is fundamental, because it is the difference of their point of view. Mr. Phillpotts identifies himself with the people of whom he writes. He and his characters and his readers are all held together in one big, universal bond of understanding and pity. . . . John Trevena, on the contrary, remains always an alien. The natives are always to him objects of special study, but rather in the spirit with which a botanist studies a new species of lichen than with any sense of the brotherhood of man. . . . It is not too much to say that one actually suffers more over the unconscious cruelty of nature and the inhumanity of man in Mr. Trevena's pages than in any of the more sympathetic pictures of life that Mr. Phillpotts has given us. . . . Mr. Trevena's attitude is quite indifferently objective; he is not the compassionate Samaritan, but the vivisectionist, finding an absorbing interest even in suffering and disease and death. (326-328).

A reviewer of Phillpotts wrote, "He does not have the strength and fierceness of John Trevena . . . but he does have larger elements of popularity. Trevena will never be widely read; there is something forbidding in his books. One is glad to have read them; Trevena will have a small audience, always eager to sample the hard-rock-like magic of such books as 'Granite' and 'Furze,' but the audience will be limited. Mr. Phillpotts should possess a larger group of readers, for his narrative vein is more facile" ("Phillpotts" 7, 10). Agreeing that their fiction grows out of a specific topographical setting, Paul Jordan-Smith, the literary editor of the *Los Angles Times*, maintained that "anything Eden Phillpotts could do well, Trevena can do better. His descriptions of Dartmoor are more varied and colorful; his characterizations more vivid and less typified; his humor more spontaneous" (*For the Love of Books* 82). It has been remarked that Hardy's novels are visually cinematic;

Trevena's by contrast are like dark Blakean engravings–their chiaroscuro intensified by a brutal Goyaesque realism that nests on the depths of the subconscious: scenes such as Will Yeo finding his friend's body eaten by rats or the foul odor emanating from the well of Mrs. Fuzzey, the midwife, down which she threw the babies of unwed mothers. Although Trevena may not have read Arnold Bennett or the French novels of Gustave Flaubert, Honoré de Balzac or stories of Guy de Maupassant, he clearly was working along the same lines without abandoning the Romantic and mystical premises of his art.

Trevena employs innovative fictional techniques–for that era perhaps even avant-garde–such as juxtaposing a robust realism with dark comedy and pathos, or imbricating local legends and folklore with his main plot-action. In fictional realism, sight is the dominant sense in describing the world; but in Trevena the visual environment and its actions are filtered by the intricacies of temperament and consciousness, the turns and twists of interiority. If most fictional worlds are understood through tightly linked moments of description and drama, there are times also when the reader must be separated from that imagined reality to be shown something new in a more comprehensive way by resources outside "traditional" forms of storytelling; that is, by expository correlations and commentary interpreting ideas or threads of emerging concepts. Trevena's plot-action is almost a background to the circumstantial scenes that are minutely executed in the foreground: his story can become tenuous, lightly spread out; his characters are the mosaic tesserae producing patterns "moving with quiet force and undramatic bearing." Walter Pater, probably under the influence of Montaigne and Sainte-Beuve, once described his fiction as presenting not an action or a story but a character, personality revealed in outward detail. Trevena'semphasis is also less on immediate gesture, utterance, or dramatic events than on finely discriminated details of setting, feelings, sensations, and intuitions. Exterior and interior worlds engage in a duet between the visual and its psychological equivalents. This modernist emphasis upon the protagonist's inner experiences as a spectator of events rather than the hero of an action challenges the idea that humans exist only by what they do, and extends or transforms that literalism to provide–if not a "self" as defined by full-blown