



Max Gate by Damien Wilkins. Wellington: VUP (2013). RRP: \$30. Pb, 216pp. ISBN/SKU: 9780864738998. Reviewed by Patricia Prime.

I enjoyed reading Damien Wilkins' *Max Gate* so much that I bought a copy to send to a friend in England who lives in Dorset, where Thomas Hardy, the novelist and

poet, built his house, Max Gate.

Of course, this is not a literary biography, but biography recycled as narrative. It is a reconstruction by Wilkins who uses, more or less, and with shifting degrees of difference, the strategy of the story-teller – whatever his attitude to the problematic of origin and truth. In one or another of its guises, the past pushes forward into the present and is projected on the future – as history, memoir, legend, rumour or story.

This is fiction, although it does provide the reader with information leading to the real, historical author. At the centre of the novel are the last days of the dying Thomas Hardy, whom we don't see as he lies in his bedroom at Max Gate. Downstairs, his literary friends are in dispute about what to do with the novelist's remains after his death. The circumstances, intrigues and in-fighting are described by Nellie Titterington, a maid, who narrates the novel.

Wilkins' narrator has to somehow convince the reader that she is frank in dealing with Hardy's life, death and the controversy that surrounds what happened to his remains. This involves her in a constant effort to create the effect of truth: her memories of Hardy and the discussions between his friends must appear to be natural and unplotted but, at the same time, give the reader a sense that the truth is being revealed from the very start. As early as the second page, we see Hardy's parsimoniousness revealed by Nellie:

Remember the time we built a roaring fire downstairs to welcome Mrs Florence back one night she'd been without him to London. We found him on hands and knees with a pair of tongs removing individual coals from the grate as a saving (p 14).

The various episodes of Hardy's life and demise as observed by the narrator are accompanied with passages and phrases from Hardy's letters, as well as from Hardy's biography which he dictated to her. Poems by Hardy and phrases from his novels are also alluded to.

These sources give a certain authenticity to Nellie's story.

As we read on, however, relationships begin to form, and a number of central themes emerge. A preoccupation with Hardy's relationship with his wife unites Wilkins' story to the various other lives, historical or fictional, and the fragments are held together by a common enquiry into what really happened during Hardy's last days. Another, seemingly coincidental point of contact is Hardy's home, Max Gate, which plays a major part in the secrets surrounding the novelist. Here, for instance, we discover that the house has been built on a Roman site:

Somehow I was moved to speak. 'When they dug the foundations of Max Gate,' I say, 'they found two Roman burial places.' There were things under glass in the Hardy Museum: fragments of a cup, chips of bone – copies, the real items taken to a real museum (p 56).

Hardy's will stated he should be buried in Stinsford Churchyard, in the company of his ancestors and Emma, his first wife. But his literary friends feel that he should be interred in Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey. Hardy's second wife Florence is pressured into making a decision she regrets and a compromise is made to remove his heart for burial at Stinsford, and cremate his body for interment at the Abbey.

There is a decided flavour of "Upstairs, Downstairs" and of period drama in this dramatic society of family, friends, visitors and servants and even mention of Hardy's beloved dog, Wessex. Here is Florence, in her nightgown, standing outside Hardy's bedroom door, listening:

A muffled, laboured room, breathing. Hear it? At her feet, Wessex sleeps pressed hard against his master's door. Along the hallway, it opens and James steps out. They see each other. For a moment, neither one knows what to do. Then she moves towards him (p 87).

There are many incidents throughout the book which could make readers feel uncomfortable, and unsure as to how they should be interpreted. Recurring patterns of concern over the rights and



wrongs of what happened after Hardy's death, and how people alter and betray those who are no longer with them, are sharp reminders of the pitfalls of life (and death). There are also reminders that we of the 21st century cannot possibly understand a way of life that has disappeared, and that was an elusive and fleeting period.

Max Gate, with its panorama of life (and death) in a famous author's home, its gracefully acknowledged indebtedness to literary traditions, and its originality, is a truly interesting novel. It is both an intellectual treat and a good story, constructed with Wilkins' unfailing sense of humour.
