INTRODUCTION

In your novels and poems you have given us a tragic vision of life which is informed by your knowledge of character and relieved by the charity of your humour, and sweetened by your sympathy with human suffering and endurance. We have learned from you that the proud heart can subdue the hardest fate even in submitting to it ........... In all that you have written you have shown the spirit of man, nourished by tradition and sustained by pride, persisting through defeat.

This was the tribute paid to Thomas Hardy on his eighty-first birthday by over one hundred English writers. Since then numerous studies have been produced by many great critics who have all justified and vindicated the tribute paid to him by fellow-authors. Though much attention has been paid to his novels, and his reputation as a modern novelist is firmly established, I shall try in this account to trace the development of Hardy criticism and of the final critical consensus about his stature as a great novelist.

Hardy's most impressive novels are set in what he called "Wessex" (his native county of Dorset) and derive much of their strength from his intimate knowledge of the speech, customs, and way of life of people in that part.

1Quoted by Irving Howe: Thomas Hardy, Masters of World Literature Series, Louis Kronenberger, general editor Collier Books, New York, p.192.
of England. The Wessex Novels were written between 1872-
1895 - the period of Hardy's greatest achievement as a nove-
list. The reception given to Jude so disgusted Hardy that
he wrote no more novels, henceforth devoting his energies
to poetry.

Literary criticism was slow in throwing light on
Hardy's genius, on the tensions and contradictions in his
art. It discovered late that Hardy was a great and honest
writer. This different work is an attempt to explore and
review the kinds of critical responses to the Wessex Novels
mainly to offer a view of the change and development in
Hardy criticism since his death.

For this purpose I have divided this work into four
chapters. The first chapter deals with reactions to Hardy's
novels during his life-time and his reaction to reviews,
 essays and accounts by a cross section of contemporary
critics. The second chapter entitled "The Hardy Revival"
covers the period 1940 to 1950. Hardy had to wait until
1940 for the special and brilliantly edited number of The
Southern Review for anything like an adequate summing-up.
It is easy enough to demonstrate the importance of this
moment in the history of Hardy criticism for it inaugurates
a serious critical concern with Hardy's fiction. I have
reviewed in detail the works of the following critics whose
articles appeared in The Southern Review: Donald Davidson,
Following these brilliant accounts came detailed studies of Hardy that helped enormously towards a better understanding of the novelist. Here my selection includes, David Cecil, Edmund Blunden and a brilliant critical study of Hardy by Albert J. Guerard. Each of these writers have in their accounts revealed the English master as an ingenious artificer who anticipated some of the best writing of our own day. The Third Chapter is an attempt to show the critical approaches to Hardy in the 50's and 60's. To this period belong two distinctive critical attitudes and much credit goes to critics in both groups for their contribution to the development of Hardy criticism. To the first category belong the thematic critics like Douglas Brown, Irving Howe, Arnold Kettle, Aymond Williams. These critics give us an insight into Hardy's response to history and admit that in the period from George Eliot to Hardy the English countryside underwent radical changes. They take Hardy's fiction as an account of the sad passing of the stable rural life and the decay of old customs. Critics in the second category felt that the thematic critics had missed out on the real imaginative centre of the novels and so failed to understand what he was writing about. Critics like Dorothy Vanhent, John Holloway and Tony Tanner reacted against the thematic approach. Their accounts were a counterbalance to the much emphasised importance of history in Hardy. These critics
came forward with serious, indispensably relevant critical statements which have stood the test of time. The Fourth chapter deals with the more recent criticism of the '70's terminating with John Bayley's study of Hardy, published in 1978. In the conclusion I have tried to assess the works of critics through the years and show how their contribution has added to the awareness that Hardy is still with us.