

THE ROAD TO EGDON HEATH

The Aesthetics of the Great in Nature

Frozen wastelands and scorched deserts, once considered cursed and avoided at all cost, are now sought out or seen as the epitome of a highly spiritual kind of beauty. In *The Road to Egdon Heath*, the first of a two-part study, Richard Bevis shows that this modern sensibility has its roots in late Renaissance science and natural philosophy. Concentrating on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, he traces its development up to 1878 and one of its earliest conscious articulations, Thomas Hardy's description of Egdon Heath in *The Return of the Native*.

Bevis examines a wide range of English, European, and North American texts, literary works as well as religious, scientific, and travel writing. He surveys the literature on mountain climbing, sea voyages, desert travel, and polar exploration, and its metaphorical uses in poetry and fiction. Relying on Addison's term "the Great" rather than "the sublime," he shows how works such as Darwin's journals, Lyell's studies in geology, and de Saussure's books on the Alps helped form an outlook on nature that also found frequent literary expression.

A wide-ranging, interdisciplinary work in the history of ideas, *The Road to Egdon Heath* traces the growth of an aesthetic sensibility that is now widespread but that was only embryonic in the Renaissance. This sensibility underlies not only much of modern literature but also our modern ideas about conservation, ecology, and environmentalism.

RICHARD BEVIS is professor emeritus of English, University of British Columbia.

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