Coate and Richard Jefferies

by John Chandler

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The Story of my Heart, 1883

SUMMARY: This report examines the links between the Victorian author Richard Jefferies and a small area of north Wiltshire (now within Swindon Borough) defined approximately by Coate Reservoir, A4269, Great Western Hospital and the M4. It discusses this area in the context of the life and career of Jefferies, its topography and character during the period of his acquaintance with it, and major references to the area in his works. It concludes with an assessment of Jefferies as a topographical writer, as formed by literary opinion since his death, and considers the importance of the Coate area in his works.

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For more information about the Trust: e-mail Jefferies_lct@tiscali.co.uk, phone 01793 783040 or visit www.jefferiesland.org.uk

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1. Coate in the Life of Richard Jefferies

1.1. Coate Farm and the Jefferies family

The author's Jefferies ancestors during the 18th century were substantial farmers at Draycot Foliat, south of Chiseldon, but the surname, along with those of the families with which they intermarried, was widespread in the Swindon area of north-east Wiltshire. His great-grandfather, also Richard Jefferies, purchased Coate Farm in 1800, and the property eventually descended to James Luckett Jefferies (born 1816), the author's father, who married Elizabeth Gyde in 1844. Richard Jefferies (Hereafter RJ), the eldest of their children to survive infancy, was born at Coate Farm in 1848. At this time, and until 1868, Coate Farm belonged to RJ's grandfather, John Jefferies, upon whose death it passed to his father, who had lived and farmed there since the time of his marriage. It was offered for sale but not sold in 1877. In September 1878 it was sold, but RJ's parents remained there until June 1879 or later. RJ himself died in 1887, but his parents survived him, dying in Bath in 1895 and 1896.

1.2. Periods of residence

RJ was born at Coate Farm in November 1848 and spent much of his childhood and early adulthood there until about April 1875. However between 1852 or 1853 and 1857 he stayed with an uncle and aunt at Sydenham, south London, returning to Coate for one month each summer. From October 1857 until October 1867 he appears to have lived constantly at Coate, then moved briefly into Swindon, but was back in Coate in 1868. In August 1870 he left for a brief adventure abroad and on his return in October lived briefly at Snodshill, a neighbouring farm, but was back at Coate Farm by February 1871. In July 1874 he married Jessie Baden and they lived at Coate Farm until about April 1875 when the couple moved into Swindon. Thereafter, although RJ may have visited Coate in 1876 and 1879, he never lived there again. His main places of residence were Sydenham, Surbiton, Brighton, Eltham, Rotherfield, Crowborough and Goring on Sea (near Worthing), where he died in August 1887.

1.3. Day House Farm and Jessie Baden

Jessie Baden, RJ's wife, was born in February 1854 at Day House Farm. She was the elder daughter of the second marriage of Andrew Baden, the farmer. She appears to have lived there until their marriage in 1874. The engagement (from August 1871) was initially opposed by members of the Baden family, and RJ was beaten up in Badbury Wick Lane in October 1871 by Jessie's brothers. According to the 1844 Chiseldon tithe apportionment Andrew Baden did not at that date own Day House Farm, but was the tenant of John Stone, lord of the manor of Badbury. The manor remained in the Stone family into the 20th century.

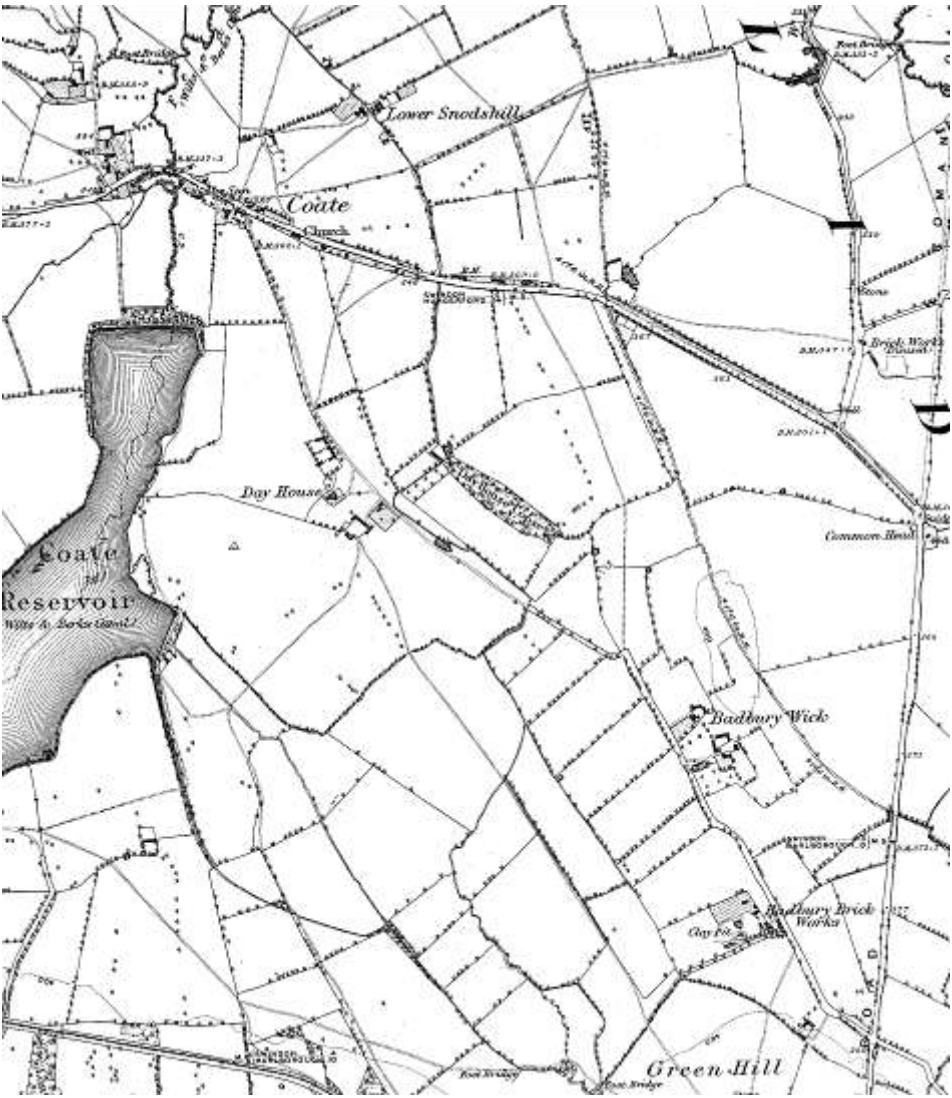

Figure 1: Detail from Ordnance Survey 6-inch map, Wilts 16, surveyed 1878, published 1882

2. The Topography of Coate in the later 19th century

2.1. Topographical features

Coate Farm, Coate village, Day House Farm, Badbury Wick and their surroundings fall within an area which, until boundary changes in 1928, lay within the ancient Wiltshire parish of Chiseldon (Figure 1). Like many Wiltshire parishes which straddle clay and chalkland it was made up of long strip territories extending across the whole geological spectrum of the parish. In Chiseldon there were three such territories: Hodson the westernmost; Chiseldon itself; and Badbury, the easternmost. The Coate area lies within the clayland portion of Badbury's territory, known as Badbury Wick, a finger of which continued northwards to embrace the modern Swindon suburb of Eldene. The western parish boundary crossed Coate Water and in fact represented the course of the stream, the Dorcan Brook, which was dammed in 1822 to create Coate Water as the reservoir for the Wilts and Berks Canal. The eastern parish boundary lay east of Day House Lane, followed approximately by the perimeter of the modern hospital. The former village of Coate lay along either side of an east–west road from Swindon to Liddington, whose subsequent enlargement, as the A4269 between Coate Reservoir and Common Head roundabouts, to make it the principal approach to Swindon from M4 junction 15, takes a course slightly to the north of its predecessor, but has largely obliterated the settlement's character. Day House Lane, linking Coate with Badbury, runs diagonally across the area, bisecting the landholdings of Day House Farm and Badbury Wick Farm. These, together with Coate Farm and (further north) Lower Snodshill Farm, controlled most of the surrounding land during the period of RJ's life. Apart from Coate Water, a brickworks, close to the motorway junction at the southern end of the study area, was the only non-agricultural land use in the area.

2.2. Landholdings of the Jefferies and Baden families

The landholdings of the Jefferies family at Coate Farm and the Baden family at Day House Farm around the time of RJ's birth can be plotted from the Chiseldon tithe map and apportionment of 1844/5 (Figure 2). It will be seen that Coate Farm's land lay both south and north of the main road, and more than half falls beyond the area of immediate interest, either north of the road or to the west, within the Coate Water Country Park. The farm was quite small, about 34.6 acres, and is perhaps more appropriately described as a smallholding. Day House Farm, by contrast, was a much larger undertaking, with 208 acres in 1844 all lying contiguously around the farm buildings, and occupying most of the northern part of the area, right up to Coate Farmhouse. The fieldnames, as given in the tithe apportionment, for Coate Farm and Day House Farm, are plotted as Figure 3. Bordering Day House Farm's land to south and east were two holdings based at Badbury Wick, of about 29 and 37 acres, and other fields farmed from Badbury or Chiseldon.

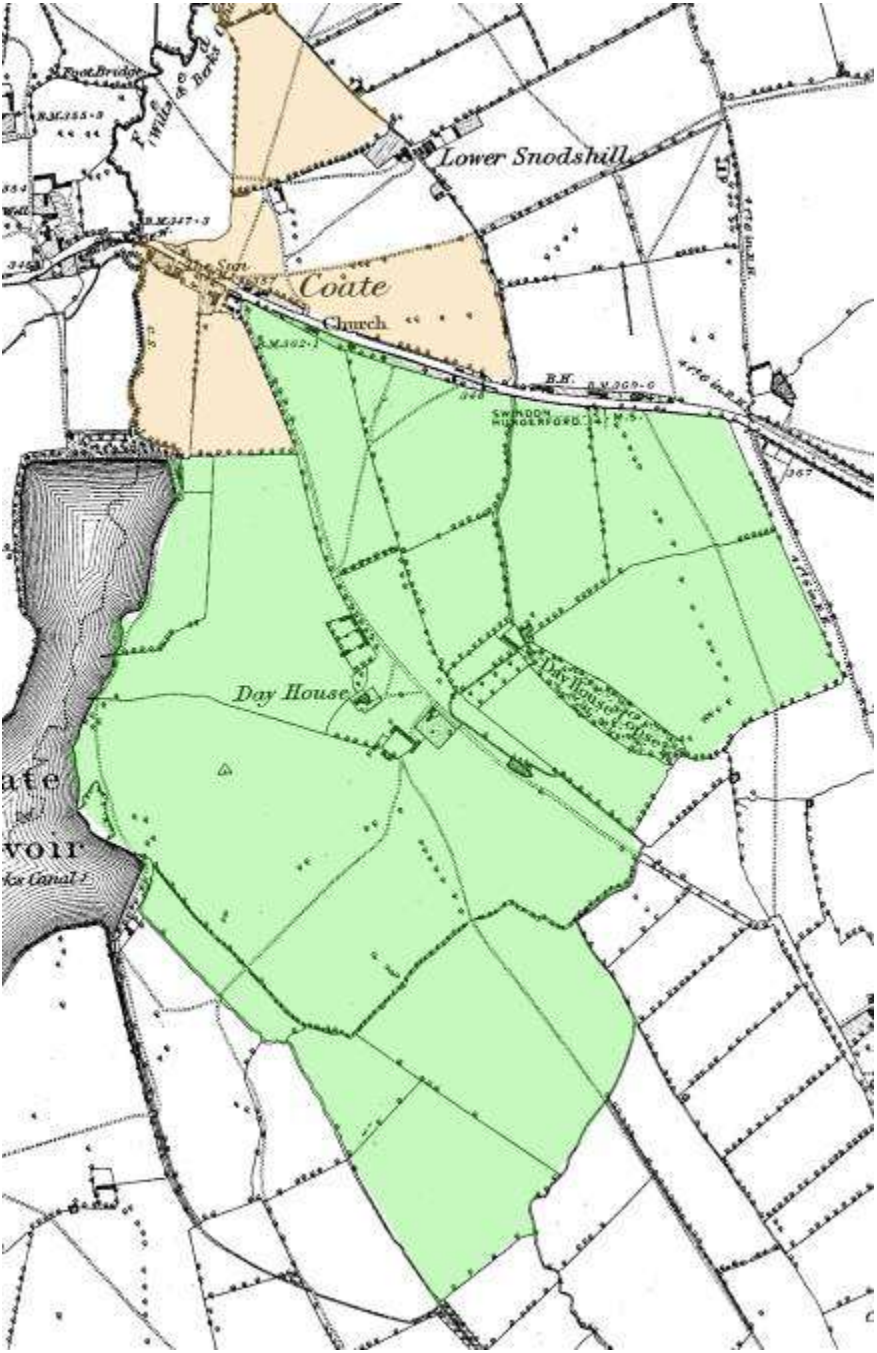

Figure 2: Extent of Coate Farm (beige) and Day House Farm (green) derived from Chiseldon tithe map and apportionment (1844-5), plotted on Ordnance Survey 6-inch scale map surveyed in 1878

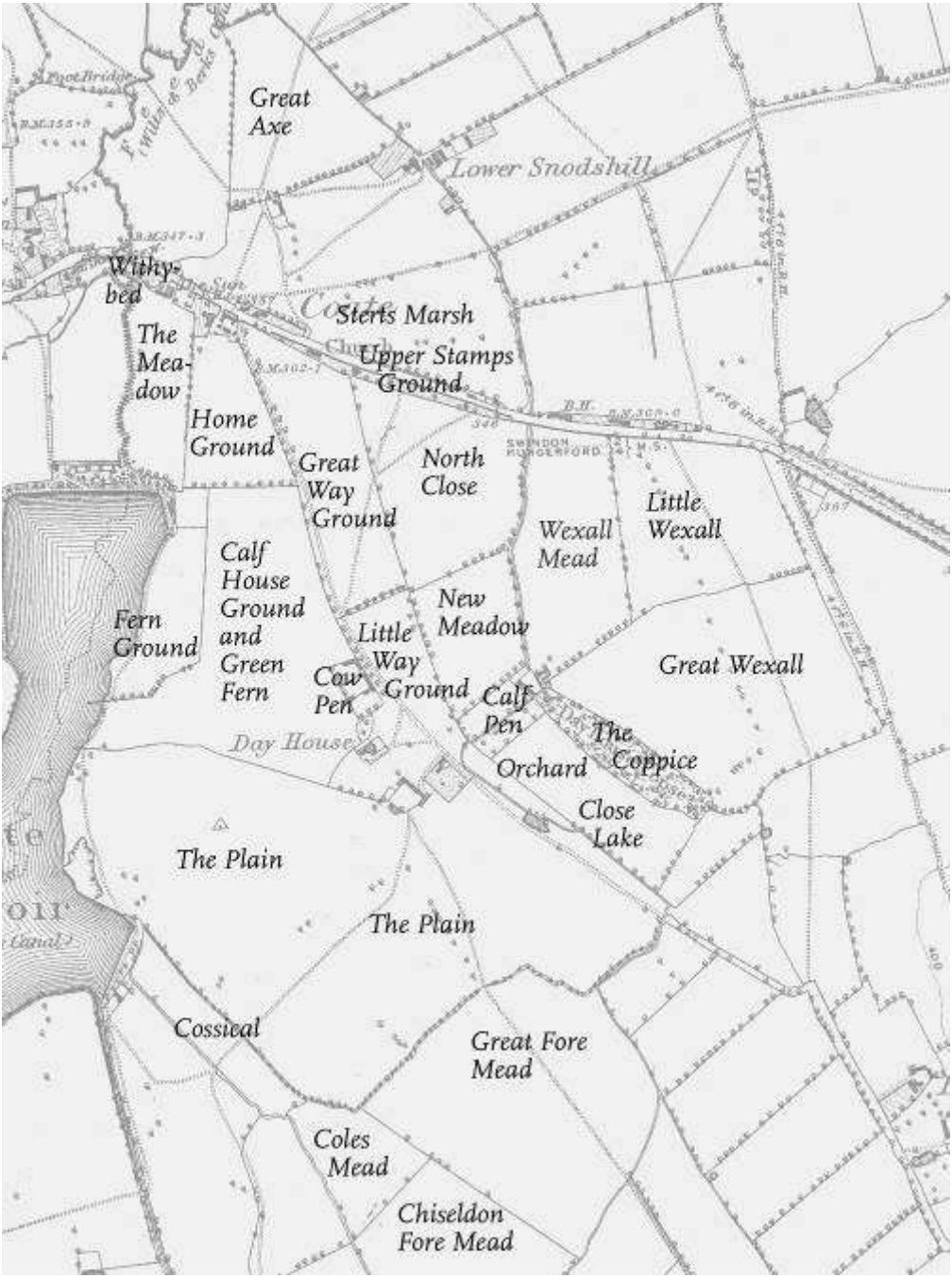

Figure 3: Field names derived from Chiseldon tithe map and apportionment (1844-5), plotted on Ordnance Survey 6-inch map surveyed 1878

3. The Coate Area in the Works of Jefferies

3.1. Jefferies's literary output: overview

RJ was a prolific writer in a variety of literary styles and subjects, ranging from journalism and amateur local history, fiction, reviews, poetry, mystical philosophy, natural history, social history and conditions, children's stories, art, literature, and sporting and country pursuits. Many of his books were serialized before being issued as monographs, and much of his later writing took the form of collections of essays. His first important book, *The Gamekeeper at Home*, was published in 1878, and this was followed by *Wild Life in a Southern County* and *The Amateur Poacher* in 1879, and two or three major works most years thereafter until his death. The onset of the tuberculosis which eventually killed him, from about 1881, coupled with the constant need to earn a living from his writing, gave an urgency to his work, which was often written under difficult and painful conditions. Volumes of previously uncollected or unpublished essays, as well as his notebooks, continued to appear after his death, and minor contributions to periodicals are still being discovered and published. Although none of his major works were written while he still lived at Coate, it has been apparent to all commentators that his acute observation of Coate Farm, its fields and surroundings, inspired very much of his writing.

3.2. Early work and local history

Although all RJ's major work was published after he had left Coate, his first attempts at writing, as a journalist and historical feature writer for local newspapers, as well as his early fiction and a history of the Goddard family, were all completed while he still lived at home. His first published description of the area came in January 1867 when in 'Chapters on Churches', contributed to the *North Wilts Herald*, he described a walk via Coate, Day House Lane and Badbury Wick to Chiseldon Church. In November 1867, in the same newspaper, he included another description in one of the excursions forming part of his history of Swindon (posthumously published as *Jefferies' Land*). This refers to the stone circle at Day House Farm, and a moat, and is worth quoting in full:

> The road from Coate makes a wide semi-circle round to Chiseldon. Day-house Lane cuts off the angle, and was formerly much used, until the road was widened and macadamised. There may be seen on the left side of Day-house Lane, exactly opposite the entrance to a pen on Day- house Farm, five Sarsden stones, much sunk in the ground, but forming a semi-circle of which the lane is the base-line or tangent. There was a sixth upon the edge of the lane, but it was blown up and removed, in order to make the road more serviceable, a few years ago. Whether this was or was not one of those circles known as Druidical, cannot now be determined, but it wears that appearance. It would seem that the modern lane had cut right through the circle, destroying all vestige of one half of it. In the next field, known as the Plain, lies, near the footpath across the fields to Chiseldon, another Sarsden of enormous size, with two smaller satellites of the same stone close by. If the semi-circle just spoken of was a work of the Druids, or of the description known as Druidical, which some think a very different thing, it may be just possible that these detached stones in the Plain had some connection with it. A little further up the same line is a place known as Badbury Wick. Wick is an old Saxon word having a loose meaning, but generally indicating a habitation. Here, on the left-hand in a field, there are deep and wide grass-grown fosses, having a remarkable likeness to a moat. A moat does not of necessity denote the position of a fortified building.

> In Roman Catholic times—three centuries since and more—when fish was the diet of all who could get it at certain periods of the year, a moat would answer a double purpose—that of defence, and that of a fish pond.

During this period too he was writing essays about the current state of farming and the plight of the agricultural labourer, based on his experiences at home and as a reporter working for local newspapers. In November 1872 a series of topical letters on these subjects, explicitly written from Coate Farm, were published in *The Times*, and brought RJ to wider attention. Essays of this period were published posthumously (in *The Toilers of the Field*) and formed the basis for *Hodge and his Masters* (1880). One of the most powerful of these essays, 'John Smith's Shanty' (1874), describes domestic discord and drunkenness in a cottage bordering the former main road in Coate. The cottage and its neighbours, approximately opposite the Spotted Cow, have gone, but their purpresture gardens survive as rough ground bordering the old road.

3.3. Fiction

RJ's fiction falls into three categories: early novels, published and unpublished, which are generally not highly regarded; the mature novels: *After London, Amaryllis at the Fair*, and *The Dewy Morn*; and the two works of fiction for children: *Wood Magic* and *Bevis*. The last of the early novels, *Green Ferne Farm*, is the only one to include significant references to the Coate area. Published in 1880 it takes its name from the meadow lying west of Day House Farm, and some of the action seems to be based on RJ's courtship of Jessie Baden at that farm. Although it contains topographical clues, for instance during the fight in chapter 10, it does not seem to reflect accurately the fields around Day House Farm.

Of the three mature novels the most closely associated with Coate is *Amaryllis at the Fair*, which is less of a novel in the Victorian sense and more a study of family relationships (autobiography almost) based on the tensions remembered by RJ within the household as he grew up at Coate. The principal character, Amaryllis, is (despite her gender) largely a portrait of RJ himself, and much of the action takes place in and around Coate farmhouse (Figure 4). In *After London* the depiction of the lake seems to be based on Coate reservoir.

Bevis, the children's book by which RJ is best known, was preceded by *Wood Magic*, which also has Bevis as hero. Published in 1881 it is a curious hybrid in which animals speak and have human traits, occupying ground somewhere between Beatrix Potter and *Animal Farm*. Much of the action takes place either around Coate Farm, in the fields described on the tithe apportionment as Home Ground and The Meadow, but known to RJ as Home Field, Little Home Field and Brook Field, as well as in the brook itself (which runs north from Coate Water, and with which in chapter 8 the hero holds a metaphysical conversation); or else in a copse which lay on the further side of Coate Water (beyond the immediate area), which seems also to have belonged to Coate Farm. There are several detailed descriptions of both, and of the journey between them, such as the following:

> After a while the mowers came and began to out the long grass in the Home Field, and the meadow by the brook. Bevis could see them from the garden, and it was impossible to prevent him from straying up the footpath, so eager was he to go nearer. The best thing that could be done, since he could not be altogether stopped, was to make him promise that he would not go beyond a certain limit. He might wander as much as he pleased inside the hedge and the Home Field, in which there was no pond, nor any place where he could very well

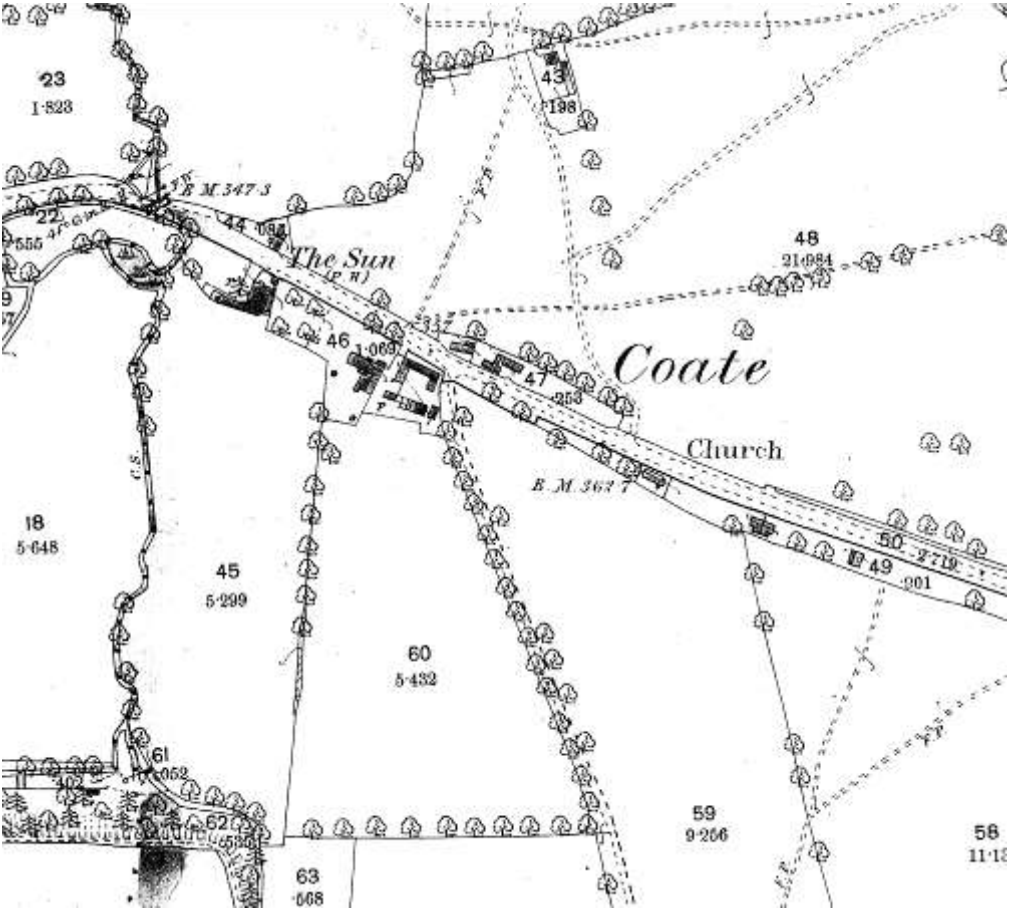

Figure 4: Detail of Coate Farm and hamlet, from Ordnance Survey 25-inch scale map, sheet 16.9, surveyed 1884, published 1886.

come to harm. But he must not creep through the hedge, so that he would always be in sight from the garden. If he wished to enter the meadow by the brook he must ask special permission, that some one might be put to watch now and then.

But more expressly he was forbidden to enter the Little Field. The grass there was not yet to be mown – it was too long to walk in – and they were afraid lest he should get through the hedge, or climb over the high padlocked gate in some way or other, for the Long Pond was on the other side, though it could not be seen for trees. . .

All this talking had passed away the morning, but in the afternoon, when the sun got a little lower, and the heat was not quite so great, Bevis, who had not been allowed to go out at noon, came forth again, and at once started up the Home Field. He easily reached the great oak-tree, and from there he knew his way to the corner of the wheat-field, where he stopped and looked for the hare, but she was not there, nor did she answer when he called to her. At the sound of his voice a number of sparrows rose from the wheat, which was now ripening, and flew up to the hedge, where they began to chatter about Kapchack's love affair.

Bevis walked on across the field, and presently found a footpath; he followed this, as the

> toad had instructed him, and after getting over two stiles there was the copse on the right, though he had to climb over a high gate to get into the meadow next to it. There was nothing in the meadow except a rabbit, who turned up his white tail and went into his hole; for having seen Bevis with the hare, whom he did not like, the rabbit did not care to speak to Bevis. When Bevis had crossed the meadow he found, just as the toad had said, that there was a very deep ditch round the copse, but scarcely any water in it, and that was almost hidden with weeds.
>
> After walking a little way along the ditch he saw the tree which had been cut down and thrown across for a bridge. It was covered with moss, and in the shadow underneath it the hart's-tongue fern was growing. Remembering what the toad had told him, Bevis put his hand on the rail – it was a willow pole – but found that it was not very safe, for at the end the wasps (a long time ago) had eaten it hollow, carrying away the wood for their nests, and what they had left had become rotten. Still it was enough to steady his footsteps, and taking care that he did not put his foot on a knot, Bevis got across safely. There was a rail to climb over on the other side, and then he was in the copse, and began to walk down a broad green path, a road which wound in among the ash-wood.

Bevis, like *Wood Magic* written for his son Harold, tells in semi-autobiographical fashion the adventures of Bevis (RJ) and Mark (his younger brother Harry) in and around the Long Pond, including the Plain, the quarry and the peninsula. These and other features are given geographically exotic names (such as the Mississippi, the Nile and the Straits of Mozambique) quite out of proportion to their actual size. A map (Figure 5), drawn by the artist David Garnett when about 12 years old, appears in the third edition of *Bevis* (1904 and later impressions), which shows the book's clear relationship to the actual topography of Coate Water and Coate Farm, including many places within the study area. Another map, derived from it, was drawn by E H Shephard for the 5th edition (1932), and a very poor map, purporting to be drawn by Bevis himself, appears in the abridged Puffin Classics edition (1974). With its minute attention to detail, its descriptions of nature, and its astute understanding of the adolescent boy's mind *Bevis* has had many advocates, including Henry Williamson: 'The farmhouse and its fields and stream, its woods and, above all, the great lake, became the scenes of one of the finest boys' stories in the English language.'

3.4. Story of my Heart

RJ's mystical and atheistical creed, based on the notion that time is an artificial construct, surfaces in many of his mature works and is given full rein in his autobiographical *The Story of my Heart*. It is not a work of topography, and is perhaps little read at present, but during RJ's life and immediately after his death it had a great appeal to post-Darwin intellectual agnostics.

Samuel Looker commented aptly on its impact on readers: 'Some are deeply moved by its reading and look upon it as one of the most outstanding books of the century, others dislike it, intensely. (in *Field and Farm*, p. 182)' Upon this book RJ sought and to some extent has achieved his reputation as a philosopher. Like Blake, his observations on the world take small, apparently trivial, features as their starting point, and chapter 5 opens with a description of the view from near Coate Farm:

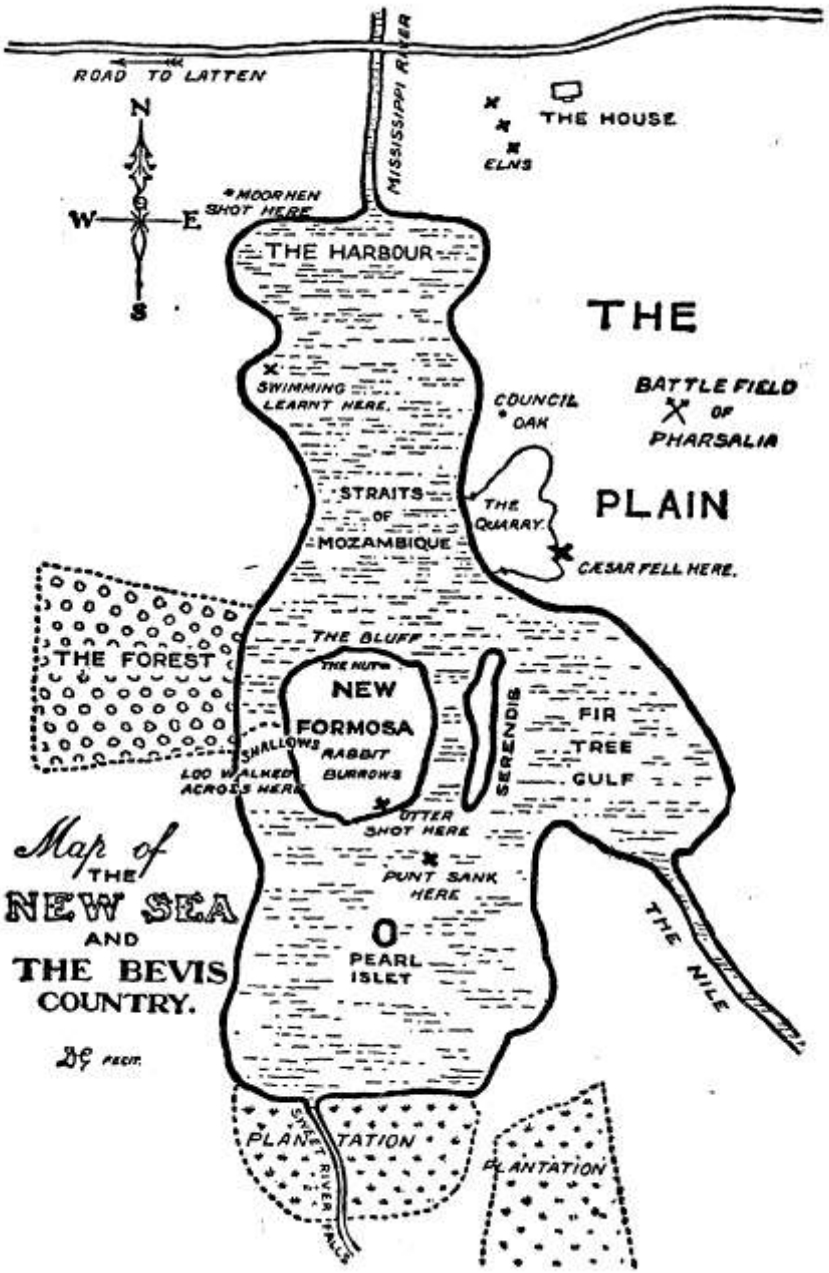

Figure 5: Map drawn by the artist David Garnett when about 12 years old, published in the third edition of Bevis *(1904 and later impressions)*

It is not possible to narrate these incidents of the mind in strict order. I must now return to a period earlier than anything already narrated, and pass in review other phases of my search from then up till recently. so long since that I have forgotten the date, I used every morning to visit a spot where I could get a clear view of the east. Immediately on rising I went out to some elms; thence I could see across the dewy fields to the distant hill over or near which the sun rose. These elms partially hid me, for at that time I had a dislike to being seen, feeling that I should be despised if I was noticed. This happened once or twice, and I knew I was watched contemptuously, though no one had the least idea of my object. But I went every morning, and was satisfied if I could get two or three minutes to think unchecked. Often I saw the sun rise over the line of the hills, but if it was summer the sun had been up a long time.

I looked at the hills, at the dewy grass, and then up through the elm branches to the sky. In a moment all that was behind me, the house, the people, the sounds, seemed to disappear, and to leave me alone. Involuntarily I drew a long breath, then I breathed slowly. My thought, or inner consciousness, went up through the illumined sky, and I was lost in a moment of exaltation. This only lasted a very short time, perhaps only part of a second, and while it lasted there was no formulated wish. I was absorbed; I drank the beauty of the morning; I was exalted. When it ceased I did wish for some increase or enlargement of my existence to correspond with the largeness of feeling I had momentarily enjoyed. Sometimes the wind came through the tops of the elms, and the slender boughs bent, and gazing up through them, and beyond the fleecy clouds, I felt lifted up. The light coming across the grass and leaving itself on the dew-drops, the sound of the wind, and the sense of mounting to the lofty heaven, filled me with a deep sigh, a wish to draw something out of the beauty of it, some part of that which caused my admiration, the subtle inner essence.

Sometimes the green tips of the highest boughs seemed gilded, the light laid a gold on the green. Or the trees bowed to a stormy wind roaring through them, the grass threw itself down, and in the east broad curtains of a rosy tint stretched along. The light was turned to redness in the vapour, and rain hid the summit of the hill. In the rush and roar of the stormy wind the same exaltation, the same desire, lifted me for a moment. I went there every morning, I could not exactly define why; it was like going to a rose bush to taste the scent of the flower and feel the dew from its petals on the lips. But I desired the beauty-the inner subtle meaning-to be in me, that I might have it, and with it an existence of a higher kind.

Later on I began to have daily pilgrimages to think these things. There was a feeling that I must go somewhere, and be alone. It was a necessity to have a few minutes of this separate life every day; my mind *required to live its own life apart from other things. A* great oak at a *short* distance was one resort, and sitting on the grass at the roots, or leaning against the trunk and looking over the quiet meadows towards the bright southern sky, I could live my own life a little while. Behind the trunk I was alone; I liked to lean against it; to touch the lichen on the rough bark. High in the wood of branches the birds were not alarmed; they sang, or called, and passed to and fro happily. The wind moved the leaves, and they replied to it softly; and now at this distance of time I can see the fragments of sky up through the boughs. Bees were always humming in the green field; ring-doves went over swiftly, flying for the woods.

Although this passage seems to derive from the landscape around Coate Farm, the point of contact with *terra firma* in the majority of the book is decidedly the chalk downland further south around Liddington. Nevertheless Jefferies himself saw the genesis of his ideas at Coate, writing (in *Field and Farm*, p. 168):

> Out in the grass fields at home when I was about sixteen these thoughts used to come, and I still recollect the extreme vividness of the pictures which formed in my mind of trees and meadows, waters and hills. Of these alone I did not think so much as of the inner and esoteric meaning which seemed everywhere.

3.5. The Old House at Coate

This is a book left incomplete and in manuscript at the time of RJ's death, which was discovered by Samuel Looker and published in 1948. It was unknown, therefore, to Edward Thomas and RJ's other early biographers. It was intended as the factual, as opposed to the 'spiritual' autobiography (*The Story of my Heart*). By its nature it contains RJ's most detailed descriptions of Coate Farm and its surroundings, and thus is a key text to reconstructing the landscape of the area in his day. A further chapter, entitled 'The Cattle Shed at Coate', had not been discovered in time to include it with the rest, and was published by Looker (in *Field and Farm*) in 1957.

The first four chapters describe views in various directions, including (chapter 1) the area north of Coate Farmhouse and across the road, which belonged to the farm; (chapter 2) the progress of sun and moon, and the shadows falling across various parts of the farm; (chapter 3) Coate hamlet and the main road; (chapter 4) Brook Field and the view southwards. Chapter 6 is also descriptive, concentrating on the buttercups and a walk from the wood which contained a spring (presumably that south of Coate Water, described in *Wood Magic*). The very brief (presumably unfinished) chapter 10 is a good example of the flavour of the work, and runs as follows:

> The wall of the ha-ha below the russet apple was not without its colour: grey lichen; moss, bright green in autumn, in summer, pale and dry; spots of red velvet, where butterflies settled and spread their wings; blue specks, where lesser butterflies alighted on the drooping grass along the summit; dragon-flies rushing to and fro; often a blue tit, whose nest was in a cranny, or who came that way with an eye to the hive bees. His nest was never on this face of the wall, the western, but always on the other which faced the south, but he frequently came here. A brown wren passed still more often: thus there was colour, but it was a minute study, the colour of detail.
>
> The hedge between the Fern Close and the Brook Field – the buttercup mead – came to the ha-ha, joining it by some dry fence, as bushes will never grow quite close up to a wall or a tree. This dry fence, willow interwoven, over-shadowed by a young evergreen or holm oak bush which grew at an angle of the wall, was a robin's possession. The dead branch of an ash at the extremity of the hedge there belonged to a flycatcher: all the summer long he sat there, flying three or four yards every other minute out over the grass, snapping an insect and returning.

3.6. Essays

Collections of RJ's essays were published during his lifetime (*Nature near London, The Life of the Fields, The Open Air*), soon after his death (*Field and Hedgerow, The Toilers of the Field, The Hills and the Vale*), and during the 1940s and later. Although many undoubtedly draw on his observations around Coate they are for the most part not specific as to the topography. Exceptions are 'John Smith's Shanty' (referred to earlier) and other early essays in *The Toilers of the Field*, and 'Meadow Thoughts' and 'Sport and Science' in *The Life of the Fields*. Another explicit essay (a relatively recent find), 'The Contents of Ten Acres – May' (in *Landscape and Labour*, 1979), describes the botanical make-up of three adjacent grass fields, 'one on somewhat elevated ground, the second sloping down to a brook, and the third, much smaller, in the corner'. This sound like the Home Field, Little Home Field and Brook Field south and west of Coate Farm which RJ also described in *Wood Magic*.

One outstanding essay (perhaps the finest he ever produced), dictated to his widow on his deathbed, is specific to Coate, and is brimful of nostalgia for RJ's childhood. This is 'My Old Village' (in *Field and Hedgerow*, published posthumously in 1889). Several of the cottages and their occupants are described, then RJ recalls that: 'almost the first thing I did with pen and ink as a boy was to draw a map of the hamlet with the roads and lanes and paths, and I think some of the ponds, and with each of the houses marked and the occupier's name'. Later follow descriptions of the footpaths, hazily as the dying author recalled them:

> There used to be footpaths. Following one of them, the first field always had a good crop of grass; over the next stile there was a great oak standing alone in the centre of the field, generally a great cart-horse under it, and a few rushes scattered about the furrows; the fourth was always full of the finest clover; in the fifth you could scent the beans on the hill, and there was a hedge like a wood, and a nest of the long-tailed tit; the sixth had a runnel and blue forget-me-nots; the seventh had a brooklet and scattered trees along it; from the eighth you looked back on the slope and saw the thatched houses you had left behind under passing shadows, and rounded white clouds going straight for the distant hills, each cloud visibly bulging and bowed down like a bag. I cannot think how the distant thatched houses came to stand out with such clear definition and etched outline and bluish shadows; and beyond these was the uncertain vale that had no individuality, but the trees put their arms together and became one. All these were meadows, every step was among grass, beautiful grass, and the cuckoos sang as if they had found paradise. A hundred years ago a little old man with silver buckles on his shoes used to walk along this footpath once a week in summer, taking his children over to drink milk at the farm; but though he set them every time to note the number of fields, so busy were they with the nests and the flowers, they could never be sure at the end of the journey whether there were eight or nine. To make quite sure at last, he took with them a pocket full of apples, one of which was eaten in each field, and so they came to know for certain that the number of meadows was either eight or nine, I forget which; and so you see this great experiment did not fix the faith of mankind. Like other great truths, it has grown dim, but it seems strange to think how this little incident could have been borne in mind for a century. There was another footpath that led through the peewit field, where the green plovers for evermore circle round in spring; then past the nightingale field, by the largest maple trees that grew in that country; this too was all grass. Another led along the water to bluebell land; another into the coombs of the hills; all meadows, which was the beauty of it; for though you could find wheat in plenty if you liked, you always walked in grass. All round the compass you could still step on sward. This is rare. Of one other path I have a faded memory, like a silk marker in an old book; in truth, I don't want to remember it except the end of it where it came down to the railway. So full was the mind of romance in those days, that I used to get there specially in time to see the express go up, the magnificent engine of the broad gauge that swept along with such ease and power to London. I wish I could feel like that now. The feeling is not quite gone even now, and I have often since seen these great broad-gauge creatures moving alive to and fro like Ezekiel's wheel dream beside the platforms of Babylon with much of the same old delight. Still I never went back with them to the faded footpath. They are all faded now, these footpaths.

The essay concludes with thoughts about the fallibility of memory, and the conflict between oral and documentary history. The Jefferies scholar, W J Keith (1963, 164) has described it as 'a summing up of his whole work', and noted that, 'it contains within itself almost all the interests and attitudes which occupied Jefferies in his all-too-brief spell of literary production'.

3.7. Major Countryside Works

Between 1878 and 1880 RJ published four major works about the countryside and its social and natural history, derived very largely from his experiences as a young man living at Coate (although by then he had moved away). The first of these, *The Gamekeeper at Home* (1878) is principally concerned with places a little further afield, notably Hodson and the Burderop estate, rather than the Coate area itself.

Wild Life in a Southern County (1879) draws very heavily on Coate Farm and its surroundings. The portrait of Wick Farm and the wildlife which inhabited or visited it occupies chapters 7-10 and, although to some extent doubtless a composite picture, seems for the most part to be based on Coate Farmhouse. RJ calculated that 35 species of wild creature regularly, and 5 more occasionally, visited the farmhouse and environs – 26 birds, 2 bats, 8 quadrupeds and 4 reptiles. The observations predictably run to far more than a roll call, as in this passage:

> It is perhaps a fancy only, yet I think that where men and nature have dwelt side by side time out of mind there is a sense of presence, a genius of the spot, a haunting sweetness and loveliness not elsewhere to be found. The most lavish expenditure, even when guided by true taste, cannot produce this feeling about a modern dwelling.

Chapters 11 to 14 describe the wildlife of the fields surrounding the farm, including the familiar Home Field and an immense pasture field here called the Warren (but perhaps The Plain belonging to Day House Farm). A detailed account ensues of an ash copse, hedge, orchard and mead, but these appear to lie north of the farm and so outside the study area. Returning to the Warren the adjacent quarry is described and a footpath from Wick (i.e. Coate Farm) to the downs across the fields. The book ends (chapters 19 and 20) with accounts of the wildlife of the brook (presumably Dorcan stream) and the lake (Coate Water).

The Amateur Poacher (1879) describes in great detail the techniques of poaching and the character of poachers. Although there are topographical details few incidents can be pinned down to the study area. Much of the action occurs in woods, presumably those around Burderop and Hodson, although chapter 2 seems to take place on Coate Water with a punt. Chapter 9, in which a gypsy is caught taking a rabbit, perhaps describes Day House Lane.

Round About a Great Estate (1880) includes a great deal of character depiction and minute observation, but the result is a somewhat composite portrait. The great estate itself, here called Okebourne Chace, is essentially Burderop Park, and the chief character, Hilary Luckett, is drawn from aspects of both RJ's father and his father-in-law, Andrew Baden. The farmhouse, called Luckett's Place, seems to be both Coate Farm and Day House Farm; and the hamlet with its inhabitants, called Okebourne Wick, although identified by Thomas as Badbury Wick (1909, 17), is clearly drawn in part from Coate itself, where the Sun public house is situated. In the book much if chapters 1 and 8 concern Luckett's Place and its dairy, chapter 4 is about the inhabitants of Okebourne Wick, and chapter 7, the Cuckoo Fields, seems to draw its inspiration, as so often in RJ's writing from Brook Field and the Dorcan brook flowing north from Coate Water.

4. Conclusions

RJ has always had his admirers and advocates. No less a figure than Q D Leavis described *Round about a Great Estate* as one of the most delightful books in the English language. The major country authors who followed him all held him in high esteem: Edward Thomas wrote the classic biography and study of RJ, and collected and edited a volume of his unpublished essays; W H Hudson chose to be buried at Worthing as close as possible to his grave, and was deeply influenced by him (the structure of *A Shepherd's Life* is very reminiscent of *The Gamekeeper at Home*); Henry Williamson wrote an effusive introduction (quoted from earlier) to an edition of *Bevis*. Reginald Arkell included in his biography of RJ a chapter devoted to describing Coate as it was in 1933 when he wrote. There were major critical studies of him by Samuel Looker and W J Keith.

And yet when Arkell wrote in the 1930s RJ was out of fashion, and he looked forward to a time, 'when public interest revives'. Celebrations around the Jefferies centenary in 1948 certainly revived that interest, and saw many new editions of his works, but thereafter RJ seems to have fallen out of favour again until the late 1970s. Desmond Hawkins, who had been involved in the 1948 celebrations, could observe in 1978 that, except for *Bevis*, RJ was completely out of print, and that to a new generation he was little more than a name. A resurgence of interest during the 1980s found nearly his whole corpus back in print again, and enthusiasm for his work, particularly his country books and essays, continues. He has always, perhaps, been championed in Swindon, where are based both the council-run birthplace museum at Coate and the Richard Jefferies Society (which has an international membership, but a particular concentration in the Swindon area).

The waxing and waning of interest in RJ probably reflects no more or less than the taste for country writing in general. Certainly any study of countryside literature is bound to devote a chapter to him as one of the major figures. There is a sense, of course, in which he was writing for his time, and his success derived from the nostalgic appeal for the countryside experienced by the new urban dwellers of late-Victorian England, whose parents or grandparents had themselves been countrymen. But that is no different from other remembered writers of the time, or indeed artists and composers. Beyond that there are acknowledged qualities in RJ's work which transcend the era of its creation, and which have a particular bearing on Coate.

'As for the country round about Coate', Walter Besant wrote in his book about RJ immediately after his death, 'I suppose there is no district in the world that has been more minutely examined, explored and described. Jefferies knew every inch of ground, every tree, every hedge (Besant 1888, 6).' A generation later Edward Thomas (1917, 137) regarded the area around Coate with awe: 'To go over this country now with physical footsteps is an act of pure piety.' And in 1933 Reginald Arkell, returning after an absence of thirty years, expressed surprise that the place had been so little spoiled. 'And', he continued, 'there seems no reason why it ever should be spoiled (Arkell 1933, 95).' The many distinguished authors who have written introductions to the 1970s and 1980s editions of RJ's works, including Andrew Rossabi, Richard Mabey and John Fowles, all emphasize how intensely indebted the writing is to the immediate landscapes of RJ's childhood and adolescence.

And yet there is something of a paradox. Although so exact and minute an observer RJ does not record the landscape as a map records it. His woods and fields, meadows, brooks, roads and houses are rarely entirely faithful to a single place. Like the characters who inhabit his books they are generally composites. We are seldom completely

sure whether Coate Farmhouse or Day House Farm, RJ's father or father-in-law, Badbury Wick or Coate, Jessie his wife or RJ himself, are behind any particular description.

And the reason for this has long been recognized, indeed it is hinted at by RJ himself in his magnificent final essay, 'My Old Village'. All the work for which he deserves to be remembered was written after he had left Coate, so that, even if (as so much of it is) the inspiration comes from the area around Coate, it is written as memory, not as reportage. In contrast to the immediacy of RJ's descriptions of places in Surrey, Sussex and around London, in which he is specific about places and times, RJ's Wiltshire is disguised by imaginary place-names – Okebourne Wick, Luckett's Place and Overborough, for instance – which are used to recount incidents from his past. In 'My Old Village' RJ acknowledges this, and ponders whether any of his memories were real. 'They turn their faces away from me, so that perhaps after all I was mistaken, and there never was any such place or any such meadows, and I was never there.' Edward Thomas, who had a similar affinity for the Swindon area and the Marlborough Downs, recognized this when he wrote:

> [RJ] described this country intimately, either for its own sake or because he could not uncover his soul without it. He knew it so well from childish rambles, long walks as sportsman, naturalist and reporter, and loiterings as lover and philosopher, that it became a portion of himself, as if he had partly created it, as in fact he did (Thomas 1917, 130).

In this concept we see an extension of the child's make-believe world of adventures, as portrayed by RJ in Bevis, where Coate Reservoir becomes 'The New Sea', Dorcan brook 'The Mississipi', and the large field by Day House Farm becomes the battlefield of Pharsalia. So the Coate area in RJ's adult fiction and country books is modified by his memory and art to suit his purpose – a purpose which transcends mere observation to become a vision of the world. W J Keith (1965, 168-9) sums it up thus:

> We call the region around Coate farmhouse 'Jefferies' Land' not merely because it was the country about which he wrote but because, in a very real sense, it was the country that he himself created. He has taught us to view it as nearly as possible with his eyes which, we are ready to admit, are keener than our own. But it must be emphasized that Jefferies saw not merely with but through the eye, according to the Blakean distinction. It is not only that we see with Jefferies' eyes; what we see with and through them is his own personal vision. It is for this reason that we may talk of his 'vision' in the double sense, because it is through creative vision that fact becomes reality.

It is this blend of minute observation and mystical philosophy, the particular and the universal, which lies at the heart of RJ's achievement and his appeal. While it is by no means necessary to be familiar with the actual landscape of RJ's childhood to appreciate his work, it cannot be denied that any RJ enthusiast who makes the pilgrimage will concur with Edward Thomas's judgement (1917, 138): 'But in his home country we are in a spirit-land'.

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