

"THE AMATEUR POACHER"

(A talk given by Mrs. Frances J. Gay to members of the Richard Jefferies Society on April 1st 1974)

The Amateur Poacher was published in 1879 by Smith and Elder, a year after *The Gamekeeper At Home*, and was compiled from articles printed in the Pall Mall Gazette.

In the preface Jefferies himself says: "*The following pages are arranged somewhat in the order of time, beginning with the first gun and attempts at shooting. Then come the fields, the first hills and the woods explored, often without a gun or any thought of destruction; and next the poachers and other odd characters observed at their work.*"

Edward Thomas, in his biography of Jefferies, considered the book an advance on "*The Gamekeeper at Home*" and *Wild Life In a Southern County*", and Dr. Keith in his "*Richard Jefferies: A Critical Study*" considers it the best of Jefferies' country books being of special interest not only for its intrinsic merits but because it anticipated his later successes in that it shows a general widening of Jefferies' outlook and his realization of whole new fields of experience still to be explored and portrayed. Indeed, Dr. Keith says "*The Amateur Poacher*" "*bubbles over with new ideas and possibilities, and is a great turning point in Jefferies' career, setting him firmly up on his true course and is almost a guarantee of his later development*"

Speaking for myself, I have found in reading this book a complete escape from the complexities and vexations of today's world, to say nothing of the pains of growing old, and have been transported right back not only to my youth when we explored Hodson Woods in fear of man-traps and the keeper, but into the simpler age of the young Richard Jefferies. I do realise the great disadvantages of life, for the poor especially in those days, but the characters in this book seem by their very artfulness and trickery, whereby they so often outwitted their superiors, to become to the reader really jolly folk and good to have a laugh with. In the pages of this book the built-up areas of Marlborough Road, Broome Manor Lane and adjacent roads becomes again a wide open district of cornfields, copses and withy beds along Coate Reservoir or "The Mere" as Jefferies calls it here.

It is very difficult usually in Jefferies books to pinpoint him down as to the exact location of the places he writes about. Features of one place are often transferred to other places, but definitely "*The Amateur Poacher*" does begin with his birthplace at Coate and one can identify the Burderop Woods, the Downs, and, I think, the big house at Upper Upham and possibly Wootton Bassett and Marlborough. Also, whilst it does seem that the Calley Mansion at Burderop is the scene of some of the young Jefferies experiences, though here again one cannot be sure; the picture is blurred, I would think purposely. It must be remembered that this book is compiled from, as I said earlier, articles written over a period and it is likely a young fellow such as Jefferies was, had to be careful not to incur the wrath of Colonel Calley by knowing too much, Richard had already been described by the Colonel as a poacher and not one he wanted hanging about in his woods.

In his "Critical Study", Dr Keith suggests there are four main themes running through "*The Amateur Poacher*" namely:

1 The Bevis Theme

concerning itself with the writer's personal autobiographical account of the childhood pursuits of himself and his brother Henry, called Mark in *Bevis* and Orion in *"The Amateur Poacher."*

2. The Country Theme

common to his books of this period. I would specially include here his exceptional interest in and knowledge of birds and other fauna.

3. The Social or human Theme

which anticipates *"Hodge and His Masters"* and also his later fiction, *"The Dewy Morn"*, *"Greene Ferne Farm"* and *"Amaryllis at the Fair."*

4. The Visionary Theme

in embryo shown in isolated passages only, but noteworthy since they are the evidence of stirrings in the writer's consciousness which were to find achievement in *"The Story of My Heart."*

And here, now, I will turn to the book itself and, if I may, read, and discuss extracts from it to explore these four themes. First :

The Bevis or Boyhood Theme.

You are plunged straight into an account of the experiences of the writer (Jefferies) who does not give himself a name but is obviously the leader, the chief adventurer, and his brother, Orion. Richard makes this explanation of the name by which his brother Henry was known in his book, (Henry emigrated to America, married and had several children of whom only one is living, and she is Mrs. Mildred Besant Jefferies Weaver, an elderly widow and faithful member of the Richard Jefferies Society. She lives in Houston, Texas and writes to me as a great friend.) In the opening chapter then, Jefferies explains: *"Orion must have the credit of the courage. I call him Orion because he was a hunter and had a famous dog. The last I heard of him he had just ridden through a prairie fire, and says the people out there think nothing of it."*

The story of Orion is of course from ancient Greek and Roman mythology. Jefferies, we know, said he learned Greek and Latin when young but evidently not sufficiently to read the myths in Greek or Latin for, he said, he read the Classics in translation only.

Anyway, in straightforward English this is very briefly the story behind the name Orion. In ancient mythology Orion was a mortal beloved of Diana, goddess of the moon and of the chase, the twin sister of Apollo, the sun god. Diana met the young hunter Orion in the woods where all day long he searched for game accompanied by his faithful dog Sirius always at his heels. The couple shared the same tastes for hunting and the woods, though Diana's interest as goddess of the chase were merely supervisory, which gave her many opportunities of meeting the handsome young hunter; and she fell deeply in love with him. Her twin brother, Apollo, the sun god, however took great exception to this infatuation of his sister a goddess for a mere mortal however handsome he was and whatever was his skill as a hunter. Apollo therefore plotted to get rid of Orion and he did it by treachery.

Diana as goddess of the chase was a skilled archer, so to divert any suspicions his sister might have of him, Apollo began to talk of archery from time to time. One day he heard that Orion was swimming far out to sea and spotted him in the far distance. Saying nothing to Diana about this, he again raised the question with her of her skill in archery and drawing her attention to what he called 'a dark blob'

far out to sea, he challenged her to hit it. Diana seized her bow, feathered an arrow and sent it with such force and so accurate an aim that she touched the point at which she aimed and rejoiced to see it vanish beneath the waves, little suspecting it was the dark head of Orion who of course was killed - even before he sank beneath the waves. When Diana discovered her error she mourned his loss with many tears, vowed never to forget him, had his faithful dog, Sirius, shot and placed them both in the sky to shine forever as a constellation.

If you have any doubt of the truth of this ancient myth about Diana, Orion and Sirius, I advise you to ask Patrick Moore about it next time he appears on television's "The Sky at Night".

Now let us turn to the first chapter of "*The Amateur Poacher*" and see what Jefferies and his "Orion" get up to.

(Chapter One. "The First Gun" Pages 9-15. "*They burned the old gun that used to stand in the dark corner up in the attic - Almost everybody and every thing in the place got shot dead in this way without knowing it.*")

Of course their mischief was discovered, and one day when they came in as Jefferies says- "unexpectedly from a voyage in the punt, something was discovered burning among the logs on the kitchen hearth; and though a desperate rescue was attempted nothing was left but the barrel of our precious gun and some crooked iron representing the remains of the lock."

(Chapter One. Pages 14-18. "*There are days in Spring when the clouds go swiftly past - and a vast store of philosophy there is in timber if you study it aright.*")

Now I must speak particularly about this clock. This is a photograph of it. You can see the landing where it stood just at the bottom of the flight of stairs leading up to the Jefferies Museum at Coate - the very place Jefferies was writing about. The clock now belongs to Mrs Kilminster here who is a second cousin of Jefferies. She will tell you about it later when I am finished. The maker of this clock was a man called Honeybone - his name is on it - who lived at Fairford. Since Jefferies' great grand-mother, Fanny Lockett, lived at Lechlade it would seem possible to me that she was given the clock as a wedding present when she married our Richard's great grand-father, also, Richard Jefferies who bought Coate farmhouse and the Bakery and Mill in Old Swindon. He was buried in the Old Holy Rood Churchyard where his name may be seen on the box-tomb preserved there still which covers his remains and the rest of the Jefferies family.

I looked into the history of the Honeybones some time ago. Incidentally there is a Mr. Honeybone living in the small village of Swindon, near Cheltenham, where he keeps the village stores. I had a telephone conversation with him and curiously enough he married a descendant of an uncle of my mother, and this uncle also made clocks. His name was Tippeon and my mother greatly prized one of his clocks which had been her mother's. Our son now has it.

The Honeybones go back to Norman times, the spelling of their name changing somewhat over the centuries. The earliest I could find was a Robert de Hunuburn in Gloucestershire in 1221.

It appears that a family of Honeybones living in London left the city during The Great Plague of 1665 in the reign of Charles II, and came to live at Fairford where the head practised his craft as clockmaker, being a member of the Clockmaker's Company, a Trade Guild which was given a Royal Charter by Charles I in 1631.

If any of you want to spend an interesting hour or so, go into our reference Library and read up all you can about grand-father clocks and you will learn why the clocks made by the old craftsmen are still functioning. The Clockmaker's Company had very strict rules. A young man was first apprenticed to a member of the Clockmaker's Company, then he was a journeyman and not until he had made his Masterpiece did he attain his "Freedom" and become a C. C. or a member of the Clockmaker's Company. Nowhere in England could a maker commence on his own accord, until he had obtained his "Freedom". A really bad clock up to the year 1725 was highly exceptional. Leading clockmakers of the late seventeenth century were as highly esteemed as Goldsmiths.

Richard Jefferies' great grandfather and Fanny Luckett were married in 1772 in Lechlade and the clockmaker Honeybone and family came to Fairford round about a hundred years before that when they founded the Honeybone clock-making firm, so as I said previously it is quite probable that Mrs. Kilminster's grandfather clock, which in Jefferies' boyhood stood on the landing at the bottom of the flight of stairs up to the attics, is the one given to Fanny Luckett as a wedding present. The Jefferies Museum is now in one attic.

But now we will pass to:

"The Country Theme"

I cannot myself identify the actual place referred to in this passage I am going to read but it may have been a part of the Calley estate, although Jefferies does give here a vivid picture of the country in which Orion and he were adventuring.

(Chapter Three Pages 58- 62). *"With this success I was satisfied that day; but the old oak was always a favourite resort - it rarely lodged on the boughs as an ordinary stick would, but overbalanced and came down."*)

This queer word 'squailer' was new to me so I have had to look it up in the dictionary. A squailer, the word is listed as dialect, is a stick with a leaded knob for striking at squirrels or other small animals. (I cannot help thinking that defenceless old people living alone in these days might be issued with squailers. They sound useful in emergencies such as you occasionally hear about.)

(Chapter Four. Pages 69-74). *"There is no sweeter time in the woods than just before the nesting time begins in earnest - a top-heavy clumsy awkward thing, it rules you, instead of you ruling it."*)

and pages 71-73 *"A dexterous woodman can swing his tool alternately left hand or right hand uppermost - the boughs, after striking the earth, rebound and swish upwards."*)

No doubt Jefferies as a lad and young man had witnessed all this in Hodson Woods. Now a passage showing Jefferies' interest in and knowledge of wildlife.

(Chapter Nine. Pages 194-199) *"A little bird comes flitting silently from the willows - vibration of a beautiful bell."*)

To turn now to the third theme:

"The Social or Human Theme"

And here for many of us may come some of the most interesting chapters of the book when we meet some old Wiltshire characters living in the Coate area known to Jefferies. Chapter Six is headed Lurcher-Land: 'The Park.' It is not possible to me to determine which village or hamlet Jefferies wrote about when he spoke of Sarsen village, but the Park would surely be the grounds of the Calley House, and the inn

mentioned sounds to me like The Plough Inn or perhaps The Calley Arms or The Spotted Cow.

(Chapter Six. Pages 112-113. "The time of the apple blossom is the most delicious season in Sarsen village - and where the loafer steadily gaze at the newcomer.")

Anyway a new character comes to befriend the boys or maybe Jefferies only, one Dickon, and we meet him in a roadside inn for he is the son of the land lady.

(Chapter Six. Pages 116-118. "And opposite a quiet thatched house of the larger sort stands - it is arranged that I am to see them work in the autumn.")

Dickon takes the lad with him and his greyhounds where finally they end up at The Mansion. and I wonder if it is the great house at Upper Upham.

(Chapter Six. Pages 127-129. "Dickon was always to and fro - her hand defended by her apron from the claws.")

Another character in the book makes interesting and often amusing reading, one Obadiah, called for short, naturally "Oby". Chapter Seven, which is headed 'Oby and His System: The Moucher's Calender' opens with Jefferies story of his hero's first encounter with Oby.

(Chapter Seven. Pages 136-139. "One dark night as I was walking - and killed the most of 'em.")

The navigators of course were the men building the Great Western Railway line and works. Oby describes how he fits in his poaching with normal work on farms where he does piece work so that going from farm to farm he learns the best places to poach. But Oby does get caught and brought before the magistrates in a place that certainly seems the Old Town Swindon where I believe the court was held either in or near the Goddard Arm, or perhaps The Square.

(Chapter Eight. Page 159 to the end of the chapter. "The next case on the list is one poaching ...")

Jefferies writes of mouchers in general and describes them. The word mouch or moucher are not in the dictionary, but probably in a dialect one of Wiltshire. I have always known the word mouch, for when I was young it was common to be asked, "What are you mouching about for?" and the answer was always, "Nothing," though usually one was hanging around hoping to pick up something or , as in the case of teenagers someone to make use of.

Mouchers in Jefferies time were not poachers nor as he says, "tramps nor beggars nor thieves." A moucher went round about the countryside looking for wild stuff or anything that he could sell in the town or to a farmer's wife. He did not want work. Wild flowers, moss, water-cress, dry soil for potting, blackberries, mushrooms; primroses and primrose roots, turnip tops, stems with their roots or briar roses for gardeners to graft standard roses on - any thing saleable, though he also keeps in with the farmers and their wives by advising them of anything he notes amiss. If he sees a sheep on its back he will turn it right side up on its feet, for sheep, as is known if they fall down, cannot get up. By these services he is often able to get a hunk of bread and cheese and a mug of ale.

The moucher sometimes sleeps on the heaps of disused tan in a tanyard - said to preserve those who sleep on it from chills and cold though they lie quite exposed. to the weather.

There was generally at least one such man as, a moucher , about the outskirts of market towns.

Jefferies describes the end of one old moucher round about, it would seem, our own Old Town, probably at Okus.

(Chapter Seven. Page 159 to end of chapter. "The years roll on, and he grows old...")

Another character was Luke, the rabbit contractor. After a delightful description of countryside which seems to be that of Hodson, the woods and the meadows, Jefferies describes a lane which sounds like that past The Gamekeeper ' Cottage, Hodson Bottom or Devil's Dip as it is also known.

(Chapter Nine . Pages 184-192 "In winter when the clouds hung low - well understood what that term conveys".)

And now to the fourth theme:

"The Visionary Theme".

As I mentioned earlier, there are in this "*Amateur Poacher*" just occasional passages which are a forecast of the Richard Jefferies as we know him in "*The Story of my Heart*". As in "*Bevis*" we get flashes of the dreaming boy who saw in Nature something beyond the woods, the fields, the lanes, the birds he loved so dearly - the inner essence, as it were, of them. Mingled with the stories of himself and Orion going out to shoot and trap, Jefferies gives little peeps of his inner most soul. For instance, right early on in the book when Jefferies is describing a trip with his friend Dickon, the inn-keeper's son, he breaks off in the midst of talking about a fox hunting expedition to speak of the "beauty of the scene, thus;

(Chapter Six. Page 127) "It was a lovely spot." to end of paragraph. "As for my self, a mere dreamy lad, I could go into the woods and wander as I liked which was sufficient".

Again, describing a winter scene walking through what seems to me to be obviously Hodson woods Jefferies writes:

(Chapter Twelve. Pages 253-254. "It is easy now to walk through the wood - and the stars rising above them..")

Again in describing one of his shooting expeditions in the woods, (Don't forget Colonel Calley called him a poacher and did not want him hanging about his woods at Hodson) Jefferies wrote a passage that is often-quoted:

(Chapter Twelve. Pages 271-273. "There was the pheasant not fifteen yards away - it was an overpowering instinct for woods and fields.")

Jefferies however, loved what he called "The Romance of Sport" and he loved to carry a gun in the fields even though he did not use it. He did not care for what he called "the modern guns"- those in use when he was a grown man and writing desperately to make a living for himself, his wife and family. The use of the modern guns he complained was "too easy." Speaking of the guns of his youth he says: "*Some of the antique wheel-lock guns are really beautiful specimens of design.*"

(Chapter Twelve. Pages 274 to end of book. *An imperfect weapon – yes..*")

There speaks the Richard Jefferies of the future *The Story of My Heart* E which open with these words:

"The story of my heart commences seventeen years ago. In the glow of youth there were times every now and then when I felt the necessity of a strong inspiration of soul-thought. My heart was dusty, parched for want of the rain of deep feeling. My mind arid and dry, for there is a dust which settles on the heart as well as that which falls on the ledge. It is injurious to the mind as well as to the body to be always in one place and always surrounded by the same circumstances. A species of thick clothing slowly grows about the mind, the pores choked, little habits become a part of existence, and by degrees the mind is enclosed in a husk. When this began to form I felt eager to escape from it, to throw it off like heavy clothing, to drink deeply once more at the fresh fountains of life. An inspiration - a long deep breath of the pure air of thought - could alone give health to the heart."

NB All page references are to The Nelson Library edition of "*The Amateur Poacher*" circa 1911.

As regards the word 'mouch' – it is prevalent in Leicestershire, with the same meaning as Mrs. Gay describes.