

Richard Jefferies: Nature Writing Power

Dr. Will Abberley ©

As part of the Swindon Festival of Literature, Dr. Will Abberley presented a lecture titled: 'Richard Jefferies: Nature Writing Power' on 9 May 2019 at the Arts Centre, Swindon. Dr. Abberley is a senior lecturer in Victorian Literature at the University of Sussex, and is currently working on a history of British nature writing. The full text of his lecture has been made available to the Richard Jefferies Society with Dr. Abberley's kind permission.

In 1879, the Swindon author Richard Jefferies published a book of essays, which ended with a bracing appeal to his readers to seek health, happiness and wisdom in natural landscapes. Jefferies declared:

Let us be always out of doors among trees and grass, and rain and wind and sun. There the breeze comes and strikes the cheek and sets it aglow: the gale increases and the trees creak and roar, but it is only a ruder music. A calm follows, the sun shines in the sky, and it is the time to sit under an oak, leaning against the bark, while the birds sing and the air is soft and sweet. ... Or it is the morning on the hills, when hope is as wide as the world; or it is the evening on the shore. A red sun sinks, and the foam-tipped waves are crested with crimson; the booming surge breaks, and the spray flies afar sprinkling the face watching under the pale cliffs. Let us get out of these indoor narrow modern days, whose twelve hours somehow have become shortened, into the sunlight and the pure wind. A something that the ancients called divine can be found and felt there still.

On the first reading, Jefferies' sentiments might not seem particularly remarkable. The association between literature and nature appreciation runs deep in our culture. Writers have been praising the countryside and celebrating its beauty for a very long time, particularly in the form of the pastoral – a type of writing that looks back nostalgically to the rural past. Its never quite clear when exactly this ideal, rural past was... Perhaps before the mechanized mass slaughter of the First World War? Or was it before steam power produced train travel and industrial factories? Or maybe before trade and capital began to undermine the feudal system of landowners and peasants? Even the ancient Greeks felt they had been born too late, with the poet Hesiod looking back to a golden age when humans had lived in perfect harmony with nature. Regardless of what past it pines for, the pastoral always relies on the same set of oppositions. The life of the countryside, embodied in the shepherd tending his flock, is natural, pure and innocent. Town life, by contrast, is artificial, corrupt and degrading. The pastoral frame of mind continues to permeate our culture – think of the film adaptations of Tolkien's stories, which oppose the green, bucolic Shire to the dark, Satanic industrialism of the Orcs. If there is something inherently conservative about the pastoral it lies in the mode's sense of the world being originally static and all subsequent changes representing degradation. History resembles one long fall from the Garden of Eden. And so, the poet of the popular imagination retreats to the countryside, seeking in its landscapes some original perfection and innocence untainted by sinful modernity.

But if we look again at Jefferies' words, we'll see that the pastoral frame doesn't quite fit. Although he suggests an intellectual kinship with 'Ancients' who saw spiritual powers in nature, he avoids equating

this view with any particular kind of society. Instead of looking backward, he exhorts us to forget both past and future and live in the present – to open our eyes and ears to the rich living world around us. Nature hasn't been corrupted, in his view – rather our artificial ways of life have blinded us to its value. His phrase 'indoor, narrow, modern days' captures the sense of humans becoming alienated from the natural world – but we only have to step outside to reconnect with it. Jefferies' description reflects his sharp eye for details, capturing the changing soundscape of a forest and the subtle colours reflected in the sea at sundown. At the same time, he presents these precise details as inseparable from the inner feelings of the human observer. He cannot record nature's facts without also deriving pleasure from them. While the 'soft and sweet' air caresses him, he feels his 'hope' expanding with the vista that opens up before him. Jefferies invokes the language of 'the divine', but he doesn't seem to be thinking of the traditional Christian God who made the heavens and the Earth. He's more interested in using nature to discover hidden depths within ourselves. Ultimately, Jefferies suggests, the value of nature is unnameable; it is 'something that the ancients called divine'; something modern, scientific rationalism can't fathom because it's bound up with humans' existence *in* nature. While science separates us from the natural world, Jefferies reminds us that we can never really get outside of nature – that we're always part of it.

Jefferies lived a short life, and died over a hundred and thirty years ago in 1887. Although the Richard Jefferies Society works hard to celebrate his work, he's not well known today as one of our literary worthies. However, I want to suggest that his writing prefigured some of the key ideas that animate nature writing today. We're in the midst of a nature writing boom. Go into any book shop, and you'll find a corner devoted to it, often bathed in lush green and flanked by dramatic wildlife photography. You'll see Robert Macfarlane's books about forgotten rural paths; John Lewis Stempel's biographies of woods and trees; Richard Mabey on the lives of wild flowers; Melissa Harrison on country rambles in the rain. These books all combine rigorous research and careful attention to facts with aesthetic and emotional responses to nature. A good example is Helen Macdonald's immensely popular *H is for Hawk*, which mixes detailed knowledge of goshawks with a memoir of the author's efforts to train one while dealing with the death of her father. By marrying the factual and the personal, nature writing seeks to offer a comprehensive engagement with nature, involving both science and art, reason and emotion. While nature writing has great respect for facts, it's also intensely aware that nature is always a construct of the human mind, mediated by images, metaphors and stories. In this way, studying nature also requires that we study ourselves. Nature comes to us as a set of individual mental associations and collective ones inherited through our culture. Thus the critic Frank Stewart observes that nature writing seeks to connect the objective and subjective, to make our hearts and our minds whole again.

Authors have been turning natural landscapes into literature since the nineteenth century, particularly in America, where David Henry Thoreau's *Walden* is often celebrated as the first book of nature writing. Some trace the tradition back even further, though, to the eighteenth-century English parson Gilbert White, whose *Natural History of Selborne* chronicled his painstaking observations of animal life around his parish in Hampshire. In recent years, some critics have hailed the emergence of a so-called 'New Nature Writing'. They argue writers have breathed new life into the form by imagining the natural world in radical new ways. For example, Richard Mabey has questioned the division between human society

and the world of wild animals. In books such as *The Unofficial Countryside*, he has shown how the two intermingle in sites such as railways, canals and derelict buildings. Such 'new nature writing' also rejects Romantic idealizations of nature. Its world of wildlife is no cosy Watership Down, but a Darwinian arena of often ruthless struggle and predation. Such writing does not simply anthropomorphize wild animals, imagining them as having thoughts and feelings like us. Rather, it emphasises their unknowability – the irresolvable mystery of what it's like to experience the world through their eyes. At the same time, pastoral nostalgia for a past golden age gives way to a more measured sense of the world as subject to constant processes of change from the evolutionary to the geologic. Humans are very much part of these processes, endangering wild species and their habitats through their activities. The new nature writing combines concern with this scientific and political reality with a renewed sense of awe and wonder at nature. Richard Mabey has complained that guidebooks and pop science give the false impression that we know nature inside out – that there is nothing left to discover. By contrast, Mabey and other authors like him present our scientific knowledge as just the tip of the iceberg, encouraging us to revere nature's mysteries and the unconscious feelings it provokes in us. They suggest that such a religious or pseudo-religious attitude can help us to find new value in nature and see it as more than just a resource to be exploited.

I don't disagree with this analysis. But I'd like to point out that these ideas are not quite as new as they seem. These concerns about our place in nature, and our feelings and responsibilities towards it have been developing for a long time, and Jefferies is a fascinating early example of a writer grappling with them. And I can't help thinking he still has some things to teach us.

Jefferies was born a few miles from where we are now, the son of a small-holding farmer, and spent much of his youth in the landscapes of rural Wiltshire. He loved to play outdoors with his younger brother Henry, and, as he grew older, he would spend hours pursuing wildlife, recording his observations in notebooks. He befriended a local gamekeeper, whom he accompanied for long days outdoors. At the same time, much of Jefferies' extended family had been in the printing business, and they encouraged his voracious reading. He received some limited schooling, before securing a junior position at the North Wiltshire Herald newspaper in his late teens. In the next few years, he married and started a family, while writing numerous articles and trying to break into fiction. In 1877, he moved with his family to Surbiton on the outskirts of the capital, where he had his first big successes publishing in London newspapers and periodicals. His essays, which drew on his knowledge of life in rural England, later appeared in collections such as *The Gamekeeper at Home*, *Wild Life in a Southern Country*, *The Amateur Poacher* and *Round about a Great Estate*. The 1880s also brought successes in fiction, such as his tale of childhood adventure *Bevis*. Also notable was his post-apocalyptic novel *After London*, which imagined society plunging back into the dark ages. Equally interesting was his 1883 book *The Story of My Heart*, a unique autobiography that chronicled Jefferies' intense experiences of the natural world. The book describes these experiences as spiritual in nature, although different to any Christian traditions. Jefferies writes of falling into reveries on hillsides and in fields, cultivating a mystical inner power connecting him to the wider cosmos that he called his 'soul-life'. In the same years, Jefferies continued to publish books on the countryside and its wildlife. Yet Jefferies was never financially secure and suffered increasing health problems. He had always been thin and delicate, but his later years brought

tuberculosis, which he hoped to alleviate by moving down to Sussex. His condition worsened, though, and he finally died in 1887, aged just thirty-eight.

Like many modern nature writers, Jefferies was committed to first-hand observation of phenomena in the field. The rambling, impressionistic style of such narratives, often following the activities of a few animals in a landscape, might seem unscientific. But Jefferies makes a strong argument for this approach capturing nature's infinite variety and complexity. He was writing at a time when prestige in the life sciences was shifting towards artificial spaces like museum cabinets and laboratories, where researchers dissected and experimented on specimens with a high degree of control and precision. But such studies left out how organisms lived in the wild, their behaviour and their complex interactions with other life-forms. Since the twentieth century, ethology has sought ways of studying animal populations in the wild, but much remains unknown and uncertain. How could it be otherwise, when environments are constantly changing and life-forms adapting to them? Further, how can we draw a line around any given 'environment' and declare where it definitively ends or begins? Jefferies drew attention to this problem in his memoir of rambling nature observations *Wild Life in a Southern County*. He writes: 'Nature is not cut and dried to hand, nor easily classified, each subject shading gradually into another'. For example, the life of a starling 'cannot be separated from the farmhouse in the thatch of which it often breeds, the rooks with whom it associates, or the friendly sheep upon whose backs it sometimes rides'. Jefferies' listing of the bird's acquaintances shows how much closet studies of dead specimens leave out – not only the creatures' immediate surroundings and neighbours, but also the mutability of these over time. The changing seasons, and threats and opportunities brought by human activity, shape the starling's existence; and this existence can only be glimpsed, however partially, through long observation of it in the field.

Jefferies' writing functions to humble the human observer, reminding us of how little we really know nature – how much it eludes our efforts to categorize and systematize it. Even its seemingly stable colour scheme, he suggests, disintegrates the more that we try to fix it. Jefferies' efforts to describe the colours of wheat as it grows through the seasons defamiliarise the crop, highlighting how much its appearance varies. Wheat, he writes, passes from 'green and succulent' to a 'bluish tinge', 'paling into yellow' by insensible gradations. Jefferies emphasises language's inadequacy in describing the wheat's final 'rich hue', which, he writes, combines 'somewhat of the red of the orange, somewhat of the tint of bronze, and somewhat of the hue of maize; but these are poor words wherewith to render fixed a colour that plays over the surface of this yellow sea'. Nature's infinite variation produces unique displays that defy the efforts of words to capture them. Nature writing, by its definition, seeks to enact a form of mimesis – that is, mimicking the natural world, reproducing it on the page. Yet, a recurring aspect of Romantic poetry had been the impossibility of such mimesis, so that no poem could ever match the experience of nature that inspired it. Jefferies echoed this idea, frequently despairing of the medium that he was working in. In a meditation on the subtle tints in a wild dandelion, he wrote: 'There are a million books, and yet with all their aid I cannot tell you the colour of the May dandelion. ... So many, many books, and such a very, very little bit of nature in them!' Nature's revelatory power lies in its unrepresentability. In the end, Jefferies suggests, his writing can only stimulate us to go and look at nature for ourselves and have our own unique experiences of it that will also be uncommunicable. Yet,

paradoxically, by deprecating his writing, Jefferies enhances the sense of its authenticity. He implies that nature lies just beyond his words, between the lines, in the burning brain that penned them.

Like Richard Mabey, Jefferies liked to undermine the imagined oppositions between town and country, nature and culture. In his collection *The Life of the Fields*, he invites the reader to wonder where the 'fields' end. One chapter describes pigeons nesting around the British Museum in London. For such birds, Jefferies notes, the building appears not a centre of civilization but 'merely a rock pierced with convenient openings ... The heavy roll of the traffic in Oxford Street ... is nothing to them; the struggle for money does not touch them, they let it go by. Nor the many minds searching and re-searching in the great Library'. Jefferies' scene diminishes the boasts of civilization. Avian life continues in its midst the same as thousands of years ago, when, Jefferies reminds us, birds also fluttered around 'the temples of Greece and round the porticos where philosophy was born'. He further implies that the humans inside the library are not so different to their winged neighbours, 'searching and re-searching'. Like birds of prey circling in the sky, the scholars are hunting intellectual morsels.

Jefferies also presents humans as formed by these natural landscapes the same as the animals. In *The Gamekeeper at Home*, he describes the gamekeeper as a kind of species of England's countryside, visibly shaped by its influences. 'His neck', Jefferies writes, 'has become the colour of mahogany, sun and tempest have left their indelible marks upon his face; and he speaks from the depths of his broad chest, as men do who talk much in the open air, shouting across the fields and through the copses. There is a solidity in his very footstep, and he stands like an oak'. Jefferies' tree imagery emphasizes the gamekeeper's oneness with the forest. The natural environments that he manages modify him in turn. In the same text, Jefferies envisages the countryside as a vast fabric of signals which animals read and which humans also learn to decipher the more they live among it. Such decipherment is not necessarily conscious but may involve some primitive, biological reactions buried deep inside. Jefferies claims the hunter can, in time, learn to recognize a rabbit hidden in long grass by 'a kind of instinct which grows upon one when always in the field'. In the same passage, he suggests that rabbit hunting on foot with dogs in such terrain offers one 'some idea of the chase as it was in ancient days'.

Jefferies sometimes suggests, in this way, that natural landscapes offer imaginative access to the deep past, human as well as animal. Jefferies was much interested in the emerging science of archaeology and discovered traces of a Neolithic stone circle near his family home. Approaching England's countryside as a repository of human memory can sometimes seem disturbing from a twenty-first-century perspective; we only have to consider who is automatically excluded from such a heritage. Think of the later nature writer Henry Williamson, who lionized Jefferies and became a vocal supporter of fascism in the 1930s. However, Jefferies' vision is less concerned with some exclusive racial heritage than with the continuity of natural landscapes over centuries. We can imagine past people inhabiting these same landscapes while living very differently to us. In his collection *The Open Air*, he writes:

Under the trees the imagination plays unchecked, and calls up the past as if yew bow and broad arrow were still in the hunter's hands. ... Sit down on the root of this oak (thinly covered with moss), and on that very spot it is quite possible a knight fresh home from the Crusades may have rested and feasted his eyes on the lovely green glades of his own unsurpassed England.

The oak was there then, young and strong; it is here now, ancient, but sturdy. ... The swine snort, and the mast and leaves rustle as they thrust them aside. So little is changed: these are the same sounds and the same movements, just as in the olden time.

Natural landscapes resemble for Jefferies tools of sympathy by which people might think their way into the experiences of their ancient predecessors. At the same time, these flashes of historical memory form part of Jefferies' vision of nature as a realm of transcendence in which rational, scientific knowledge only scratches the surface. In the same essay, he writes that 'the forest always contains a mystery. The idea that there may be something in the dim arches held up by the round columns of the beeches lures the footsteps onwards. ... In the thickets, perhaps, the shadowy thickets with front of thorn – it has taken refuge and eluded us. Still onward the shadows lead us in vain but pleasant chase'. The dimmer the forest floor becomes, the richer its suggestiveness, prodding the mind to wonder at what might yet exist beyond our immediate perceptions. Such hidden worlds are not necessarily benign, however. Robert Macfarlane notes that the eerie character of natural landscapes can point to concealed histories of conflict that belie cosy, National-Trust-style images of the countryside. Noting the frequency with which gamekeepers unearth human skeletons, Jefferies reflects: 'beautiful as the country is ... it would be difficult to find an acre of ground that has not been stained with blood. A melancholy reflection this, that carries the mind backwards, while the thrush sings on the bough, through the nameless skirmishes of the Civil War, the cruel assassinations of the rival Roses, down to the axes of the Saxons and the ghastly wounds they made. Everywhere under the flowers are the dead'.

The theme of mysteries just beyond our ken also features in Jefferies' meditations on the possible minds and emotions of animals. For a long time, in the twentieth century, these kinds of speculations were taboo in animal science, dismissed as gullible anthropomorphism. However, recent decades have seen new arguments for considering non-humans as conscious agents capable of making choices and perhaps reasoning to a degree. It's therefore interesting to see how sympathetic Jefferies was to ideas of animal cognition, a sympathy that was rooted in his rural knowledge. In *The Gamekeeper at Home*, he writes:

I have observed that almost all those whose labour lies in the field ... admit the animal world to a share in the faculty of reason. It is the cabinet thinkers who construct a universe of automatons. ... Experience certainly educates the dog as it does the man. After long acquaintance and practice in the field we learn the habits and ways of game —to know where it will or not be found. A young dog in the same way dashes swiftly up a hedge, and misses the rabbit that, hearing him coming, doubles back behind a tree or stole; an old dog leaves nothing behind him, searching every corner. This is acquired knowledge.

Jefferies further suggests that to properly observe wild animals one must sympathize with them. By understanding their fears, one can avoid acting in ways that appear threatening to them, and so keep them in view. 'The secret of observation', he asserts, lies in 'stillness, silence, and apparent indifference. In some instinctive way these wild creatures learn to distinguish when one is or is not intent upon them ... So long as you observe them, as it were, from the corner of the eyeball, sideways, or look over their heads at some-thing beyond, it is well. Turn your glance full upon them to get a better view, and they are gone'. The ideal of scientific objectivity that was gaining authority at the time sought to erase the

personality of the observer, assuming that the best kind of observation was mechanical, undistorted by human feelings. However, Jefferies implies that wild animals can only be properly understood with a sympathetic eye; indeed, he suggests that without such a sympathetic gaze they cannot even be observed since the field observer requires a kind of consent from them. Unlike the laboratory scientist who seeks to dissect and dominate nature, Jefferies exemplifies a more humble and respectful form of nature study.

At the same time, Jefferies also qualifies his sympathetic portraits of animals, emphasizing their alterity, their otherness, which perhaps exceeds the limits of human imagining. Sometimes, his efforts to envisage wild animals' experiences of the world require us step outside of our habitual human perspective. He argues that millennia of attacks from humans must have caused many wild animals to fear the human form, and their fear to fixate on humans' arms. 'Animals, birds, and fishes', Jefferies writes, 'have learned to watch and to dread man's arms. He raises his arms, and in an instant there shoots forth a bright flash of flame, and before the swift wings can beat the air again the partridge is dashed to the ground'. Further, from a nonhuman point of view, Jefferies reasons, these limbs must seem shockingly bizarre and abnormal. 'Suppose yourself with your arms tucked to your sides under the fur of an animal', Jefferies suggests: 'something of the idea may be gathered by putting on a cloak without sleeves or armholes. At once it will be apparent how helpless all creatures are in comparison with man'. Empathizing with nonhumans involves making human forms and perceptions strange. At the same time, Jefferies' admiration of animals' apparent *joie de vivre* can be tinged by the regretful thought that humans are incapable of such immersive pleasure due to their consciousness of their mortality. While humans live in endless fear of death, he claims, animals appear 'so trustful and so content with their fate, resting in themselves and unappalled. If but by reason and will I could reach the godlike calm and courage of what we so thoughtlessly call the timid turtle-dove, I should lead a nearly perfect life'. Jefferies' meditation points to the impossibility of him enjoying life in the moment as animals seem to do, since 'reason' abstracts him from life's immediacy. Paradoxically, sympathizing with animals can foreground their strangeness and difference.

Another strikingly modern note in Jefferies' writing is his sense of nature's indifference to humans' fate. For centuries, religiously minded authors had argued that nature testified to a benevolent creator who shaped the world to maximize happiness and offer moral guidance to humans. The parson John Ray had thus claimed that God had planned for humans to develop fire and metalwork by making wood combustible and iron ore minable. The development of natural history was undermining this human-centred view, however, as researchers increasingly approached the living world as a system of adaptations in which human interests were largely irrelevant. Studying animals in terms of their material survival made the old, religious, human-centred view seem hopelessly naive. Jefferies expressed this attitude most poignantly in one of his last essays, entitled 'Hours of Spring'. The essay begins by describing his confinement to bed by illness, which prevents him from enjoying the natural wonders outdoors. Jefferies initially presents nature as a sort of text written to delight and instruct the human observer. He writes: 'The bird upon the tree utters the meaning of the wind ... All that is delicious and beloved of spring-time are expressed in his song. Genius is nature, and his lay, like the sap in the bough from which he sings, rises without thought. ... The green hawthorn buds prophesy on the hedge'.

Nature's objects seem flushed with significances. Yet these significances are, perhaps, not transcendent but only terrestrial, signalling changes in the environment. The 'meaning' of the bird's song turns out to be merely the coming of 'the grass and wildflower' and 'the green leaf'. Jefferies continues, 'The commonest pebble ... seems to me so wonderful; my mind works round it till it becomes the sun and centre of a system of thought and feeling'. His choice of words complicates the picture, though, emphasising the subjective nature of these appearances. The pebble is not in itself meaningful but requires the observer's 'mind' to inscribe it with meanings. Jefferies makes this point explicit as he contrasts his many hours outdoors with his current, indoor condition. Thinking out of how he used to carefully record organisms' gradual changes outside as winter turned to spring, he wonders, 'how they can all get on without me – how they manage, bird and flower, without me to keep the calendar for them'. The songs of returning birds outside the window show that the natural world is quite able to 'get on' without him noting down its rhythms. Jefferies reflects:

For they were so much to me, I had come to feel that I was as much in return to them. The old, old error: I love the earth, therefore the earth loves me—I am her child—I am Man, the favoured of all creatures. I am the centre, and all for me was made. ... These delicious violets are sweet for themselves; they were not shaped and coloured and gifted with that exquisite proportion and adjustment of odour and hue for me.

As an agnostic with mystical, pagan sympathies, Jefferies imagines nature existing independently of human perceptions. The human observer is no intended addressee but only a bystander whose delight in certain objects seems random and insignificant in the broader scheme of life. The author's romantic love for nature clashes with his scientific awareness of its mindless indifference to humans.

Finally, I'd like to suggest that Jefferies also sometimes looks forward to a more ecological view of nature that would develop in the twentieth century in appeals for wildlife conservation. Near the end of *The Amateur Poacher*, just before the passage about going outdoors and finding something divine in nature, Jefferies recalls stalking a pheasant one afternoon, and, finally, taking aim at it with his gun. 'My finger felt the trigger', he writes, 'and the least increase of pressure would have been fatal; but in the act I hesitated, dropped the barrel, and watched the beautiful bird'. Jefferies concludes that observing wild animals alive is superior to just killing them and possessing their corpses. The longer he watches such animals, the more he values them as living beings and regards their slaughter a waste of potential pleasure. This dynamic is made even clearer in *The Life of the Fields*, when Jefferies offers a lovingly detailed description of the wild otter and its habits. Having finished this vivid picture of an animal that could then still be found swimming in the Thames, Jefferies comments:

The truth is the otter is a most interesting animal and worth preservation, even at the cost of what he eats. ... In the home counties, and, indeed, in many other counties, the list of wild creatures is already short enough, and is gradually decreasing, and the loss of the otter would be serious. This animal is one of the few perfectly wild creatures that have survived without any protection from the ancient forest days. ... It would be imagined that its occurrence so near the metropolis would be recorded with pride; instead of which, no sooner is the existence of an otter suspected than gun and trap are eagerly employed for its destruction. I cannot but think

that the people of London at large, if aware of these facts, would disapprove of the attempt to exterminate one of the most remarkable members of their fauna. They should look upon the inhabitants of the river as peculiarly their own.

It's here, I think, that Jefferies was most important as a nature writing pioneer. Later writers like W. H. Hudson, Edward Thomas and the environmental activist Rachel Carson would all cite him as a crucial influence, helping them to recognise the intrinsic value of nature, and the need to protect it. It might be objected that Jefferies' conservationism remains human-centred. He values the otter for the romantic pleasure it offers humans rather than as a species worth preserving simply for its own sake, or for the sake of biodiversity. However, such rhetoric that frames wildlife as national treasures has been instrumental to many conservation campaigns in Britain, and remains so. The journalist and environmental activist George Monbiot argues such appeals to emotion and our sense of beauty are necessary for environmental politics, as he writes: 'The reality is that we care because we love. Nature appealed to our hearts, when we were children, long before it appealed to our heads, let alone our pockets ... Acknowledging our love for the living world does something that a library full of papers on sustainable development and ecosystem services cannot. It engages the imagination as well as the intellect'. Literature undoubtedly has a role to play in helping us to love nature, to value it, and to recognise that *its* destiny is also *our* destiny. If we want today to be reminded of nature's capacity to fascinate, surprise and bewitch the human mind with its endless beauty and mysteries, we could do a lot worse than turn to Richard Jefferies, and his enthusiasm for the living world around us – an enthusiasm that can be highly infectious.