

The True Richard Jefferies

by SAMUEL J. LOOKER

AN EXAMINATION OF THE
MISUNDERSTANDINGS OF
MALCOLM ELWIN in

The Essential Richard Jefferies

Damnōnt quod non intelligunt

(Men condemn what they do not understand).

Amica pax, magis amica veritas

(I love peace but I love truth even more).

"In almost all our critical performances the affections play some part, and I do not see that anything can be done to keep them out."
Edmund Blunden, *Notes and Queries*, 11th of December, 1948

Bromlea, Leek Road, Cheadle, North Staffs.

The True Richard Jefferies

I

In November, 1948, a book was published called *The Essential Richard Jefferies*, edited by Malcolm Elwin. All I knew of Elwin was that he was a literary critic and publisher's reader who had written studies of Charles Reade, Walter Savage Landor, Powys and others. These had shown there was nothing heliacal about Mr Elwin. He had both feet on the ground. I understood from mutual friends that he was a pleasant and kindly person. Indeed, the only thing I knew to his disadvantage was that he thought Wordsworth 'morbid,' and this of course, was a pity, a great pity for his own sake.

What does essential mean? It means in brief, 'constituting a thing's essence. indispensable.' This means that his best and most characteristic writings should be drawn upon if an author is to be represented by his essentiality. Mr Elwin's book, apart from a long introduction, consists of twelve chapters from *Amaryllis At The Fair* the whole of *The Story of My Heart* (which between them take up no less than 121 pages) various short extracts from *Wild Life in a Southern County* and the other three early country books, two or three from *Bevis* and *Wood Magic*, *Greene Ferne Farm*, *After London* and *Red Deer* and finally, seven essays chosen from four other books.

It is odd that Elwin should quote the whole of *The Story of My Heart*, for elsewhere he refers to it as 'a dithyramb of emotional torment.' Why then inflict it on the reader? I am sorry however, for any man who thinks thus of this great, original and epoch-making book.

The greatest fault in the selection itself is that of omission. It ignores completely three of Jefferies' most essential books, *Hodge and His Masters*, *Toilers of the Field*, and *Hills and the Vale*. No balanced summary of Jefferies' achievement as a writer in the form of a selection is possible or final which leaves these three out of account. *Hodge* is Jefferies' masterpiece, while *Toilers* includes many of the most characteristic studies of rustic life and habit which are the very essence of his best writing, such as "John Smith's Shanty," and "A True Tale of the Wiltshire Labourer." One or two of the essays in *Hills and the Vale* are also essential.

Seven miscellaneous essays are included. An inadequate number, which cannot possibly represent Jefferies' real strength and diversity of talent in this direction. But if the "dithyramb of emotional torment," which caused Mr. Elwin such distress, and the large slab of *Amaryllis* had been much cut down, further pages could have been

set free for the quotation of essential essays from the general body of Jefferies' writings.

Can any selection from Jefferies be considered essential which leaves out "The Pageant of Summer," "Meadow Thoughts," "The Country Sunday," "Winds of Heaven," "Sunny Brighton," "Nature in the Louvre," "Out Doors in February," "One of the New Voters," "Golden Brown," "The Pigeons at the British Museum", "A London Trout", "The River", "January in the Sussex Woods", "The Country-side Sussex", "Herbs", "Woodlands", "A Barn", "Nature and Books", "Outside London", and "Walks in the Wheatfields"? Indeed, there are quite fifty essays of the first quality which should at least come under review by anyone making a selection.

Mr Elwin has a right to his own opinions on Jefferies, but one has also the right to challenge his interpretation of the life and writings, which, however sincerely meant, presents a very unfavourable picture and arrives at a verdict of guilty on misunderstood evidence. It shows repulsion, and perhaps it is idle to argue with repulsion. But I am less concerned with Elwin, than to paint the true picture of Jefferies.

That I am not alone in my view let the critic and biographer, Mr. C. E. Vulliamy declare. Writing in the *Spectator* of November 12th, 1948, he said "Mr Elwin is a hostile witness, and the wonder is that he undertook the job at all. No assessment is of much value unless it reveals a perceptible amount of understanding. In writing of Jefferies and his work Mr Elwin displays an acerbity of moral annoyance which only too plainly shows that he dislikes Jefferies and is unable to commend him except in terms of querulous and restricted patronage."

The gloss, so to speak, is always to Jefferies' disadvantage.

I have devoted many years to the study and collection of Jefferies' writings and to his biography. I own most of his MSS and his private note-books, both published and unpublished, and I differ in toto with almost every word of Elwin's introduction. I believe it to be quite sincere and well meant, as everything he writes is, but I challenge its factual interpretation and I disagree profoundly with its whole emphasis and conclusions. It is a complete and astounding misreading of Jefferies' genius and a failure to understand.

It would not be worth while traversing in detail a few paragraphs of hostile Jefferies' comment, such as made elsewhere by Geoffrey Grigson and John Moore, for example. One judges oneself in judging Jefferies. But it is a different matter when a whole book called the *Essential Jefferies* appears. Then one has the right and the duty, to examine it closely. Before doing so, it might prove of interest to place on record one or two high critical favourable opinions in contradistinction to Elwin's unfavourable ones.

"His inspiration came directly from his eyes. What beauty he uncages is always truth." Sir William Beach Thomas

"It is rare for a writer to feel as deeply as did Jefferies the spiritual content of the world which surrounded him, and at the same time to be able to analyse with infinite delicacy the objective appearances in which that spirit is made manifest." Dr. Harry Roberts.

"What an observer Jefferies was in and off the field and all that therein is! The superb sweep and rhythm of his prose derive all their quality from this power of transmutation." H. J. Massingham.

The most poetic and one of the most observant of all English naturalists." Clifford Bax.

"When, finding no security anywhere, we seek vainly for a way of escape, is it so small a thing to hold the key to a sanctuary where happiness may be found?" (i.e. The writings of Jefferies.) Reginald Arkell.

"Few men have put themselves into words with such unconsidered variety. He expressed the whole range of a man's experience in the open air. . . He drew nature and human life as he saw it, and he saw it with an unusual eye for detail and with unusual wealth of personality behind." Edward Thomas.

"If all the rest of the literature of this day prove ephemeral and is doomed to swift oblivion, the work of Jefferies shall not perish." Sir Walter Besant.

"There are few figures more heroic in the annals of our literature than that of this solitary, unfortunate, yet brave-hearted man." Henry Salt.

"By his *Wild Life* he stands by Gilbert White; by his *Story of My Heart* he stands by himself, a little apart from the poets." Edward Garnett.

"Gilbert White, Ruskin, and Thoreau had the same great gifts, and few others can be compared to them. Jefferies resembled Thoreau in his love of solitary meditation; Ruskin in his love of beauty." Lord Avebury.

"No mean following regard him as immortal; at any rate as a nature prophet and interpreter, matchless in his generation." A. G. Bradley.

"Jefferies' writings were based on what he truly knew and felt—prose passages often glowing with the perceptions of his inner mind: with the light of the future. He was a genius, a visionary whose thought and feeling were wide as the human world, prophet of an age not yet come into being—the age of sun, of harmony." Henry Williamson.

These passages could be matched by scores of others equally penetrating and to the point. The one or two critics hostile to Jefferies are alone on their altitude of intellectual arrogance towards a writer so much greater than themselves. No doubt pigmies always dislike a giant.

II

The introduction to *The Essential Richard Jefferies* runs to eighteen closely printed pages. There is no bibliography, no notes, except six lines of comment on the text, and no index.

I will now examine it point by point, first summarizing Elwin's criticisms of Jefferies in italics and then placing my answer below

Page 10. *That Jefferies' life and character was afflicted by morbid depression from his childhood.*

There is no evidence of morbid depression as a whole. Once or twice towards the end of his life under the immediate strain of great suffering, and earlier now and then under the pressure of outward circumstances, Jefferies may have given utterance to a few impatient thoughts, but not otherwise, and which among us has not done the same? Jefferies had a fairly happy childhood, at times intensely so, and especially for his own genius and development, much to be envied. I do not know what form of boyhood Nottingham and its surroundings provide, but I doubt if it is a much happier one than that of the young Jefferies at Coate, on fire with love for knowledge and for nature lore, and anxious to acquire, not intellectual arrogance, but insight. It is as easy to invent puppets and to misunderstand men and motives because of a wrong critical outlook as it is difficult for the mediocre mind to understand that of genius. Criticism sometimes whittles creativeness away. Florio writing of literary critics said: "Behold what presumption is this, everyone is given to condemn bookes, few to commend them."

Jefferies own boyhood is described (perhaps slightly idealized) in *Wood Magic* and *Bevis*. Not an unhappy one, and no morbid depression there.

Page 10 *That Jefferies was lacking in the creative faculty*

After London proves the contrary

Page 10. *That the attitude of Mrs Jefferies infected her son with class-consciousness.*

There is no evidence of this. Jefferies had the habits and the mien of a gentleman. He spoke well, had good manners and address and was kindly and sympathetic. He knew himself to be a man of parts. But this is not class consciousness nor is there any real evidence of snobbishness.

Page 11. *That Jefferies praised the open air, and did not like farm work.*

Quite irrelevant. Does Mr. Elwin like farm work? I do not know, neither do I care, for it bears no relation whatever to his literary merits. Did not Thomas Love Peacock tell us that "he who drives fat oxen need not himself be fat!" Should Jefferies have liked farm work, and if so why? We do know that Jefferies not only praised the open air, but, until illness came, was an out-of-doors man, which completely squashes the criticism. Perhaps Jefferies did not like shovelling muck, or milking cows, or hoeing turnips. Had he not the right? He was a writer, not a farmer. However, he knew his subject, inside out.

Page 12. *That Jefferies was sent to his uncle and aunt at Sydenham for cheap holidays.*

Very cheap, unworthy and snobbish. The happiness and profit of a holiday is not necessarily reckoned by what it costs. In any case, it was very natural, especially nearly a century ago, apart from any question of cheapness, that a young nephew should stay with his favourite uncle and aunt, of whom in a letter he once said that he loved them even more than his parents. Has Mr. Elwin ever stayed with much loved relations? If so, I hope that any future biographer of that eminent critic will not mistake such celestial visits for holidays on the cheap.

Page 12. *That Coate had but few books and that Jefferies read but little. That there was a parsimony of literary illusion in his writings and no inspiration from reading as a boy, and no speculation from contact with great minds and no critical taste.*

Jefferies did not seem to be aware of his great lack. For he had recourse to Sydenham for long periods on his 'cheap holidays,' and his uncle had a well stocked and catholic library. Jefferies' father and grandfather too were well read and had great interest in books. The grandfather especially, besides a good collection of his own, to which Richard Jefferies had constant access, was in the habit of consulting the large library of his neighbours, the Goddards. There was also Jefferies' uncle on his mother's side, Frederick Gyde, the engraver, described as *Alere Flama* in *Amaryllis*, an exceptionally well-read man, who gave Jefferies drawing lessons and talked to him about books and writers, many of whom were his friends.

No lad, in short, for his age and circumstances, was better read than Jefferies. He was in youth an insatiable and omnivorous reader. As he grew older he thought more and read less. However all his life Jefferies read wisely and well. He owned, before ill-health depleted his resources, a good collection of his own. I have on the table before me as I write, a copy of a little book, published by William Pickering in 1847 on *Wayland Smith, A Dissertation on A Tradition of the Middle Ages*, from the French of Depping and Michel, with additions by S. W. Singer and Oehlenschläger. This has Jefferies' signature on the fly-leaf and his address at Victoria Street, Swindon, in his own hand. This would be as early as 1875. It is typical of Jefferies' care when preparing to write on Wiltshire Downs with their memories of Wayland Smith that he should possess this rather out of the way volume. When, a little later on, he came to reside at Surbiton, he attended book sales and made notes of his purchases. There are various published entries in his note-books on the fact, as well as many book lists, both for reading and review. These lists, to the confusion of all cocksure but mistaken critics, will be printed in due course. An interesting passage on Quaritch, the famous book-

seller, at auctions, will be found in *Amaryllis*. The note-books alone show the range and extent of Jefferies' reading and thought. No writer of a similar kind had a better intellectual background for his own particular job.

As to literary allusion, Jefferies was an observer of Nature, an original and fecund writer, independent in thought and utterance to the point of idiosyncrasy. Why on earth *should* he clutter up his fresh, unfeigned vision with literary allusion? He valued above all else his independence of thought and utterance and knew well when *not* to quote. As in life he avoided all contacts which he believed would compromise his independence, so in letters he deliberately eschewed copious quotation. He wished, all honour to him, to come to his nature writing with his eye directly on the object, like the 'morbid' Wordsworth, free from the heavy impedimenta with which literary pundits are wont to encumber their minds and by whose aid they darken counsel.

Although Jefferies did not quote like T. S. Eliot, he shared that writer's admiration for Dryden. On his 'cheap' holidays Jefferies had even acquired a great liking for Goethe. Possibly this has some sinister significance. A smattering of pseudo-Freudian doctrine might suggest that it was a legacy from his parents' marital unhappiness and his own frustrated self-pity?

Jefferies' very virtue as a writer on Nature, the one that chiefly marks him out as an original thinker, as a fresh observer, is turned to his detriment. The quality that makes his best nature writing so delightful and better than Hudson, who sometimes quoted too much, is mentioned as if it were a disadvantage or a blemish. Could anything be more entirely fatuous? The Mountain has been in labour, and brought forth a mouse!

Page 13. *That Jefferies looked up data in libraries to parade a semblance of learning.*

Mr Elwin read various books by Jefferies from the *London Library* whilst preparing his selection. I should be most loth to believe that he did this in order to 'parade a semblance of learning.' It was obviously his duty, and I am glad that he came into contact with the general body of the writings of the man he had agreed to edit. While I profoundly admire his conscientious industry, I cannot equally commend his interpretation of what he read. I must however condole with him on the task of reading through such an uncongenial and incompatible writer as Jefferies evidently proved to be. At any rate, Mr Elwin's own learning, so far as Richard Jefferies is concerned, is very real, very obvious, and very wrong.

Original unpublished letters in my collection, show the pains Jefferies took in assembling his materials and in writing the drafts of his articles, which were often recast three or four times. *Wild Life* for example. All this shows his careful collation of the facts.

Page 13 *That routine renewed discontent and that Jefferies progressed in self-pity and that he neglected self-discipline*

A little proof instead of assertion, would be of value. Where is all this self-pity to be found in his life or writings? Mr Elwin, with iron self-discipline, free from all routine, let us hope, is severe. Could we imagine Blake, or Keats, or Shelley before him, or the 'morbid' Wordsworth? Would they emerge unblemished, free from the schoolmaster's rod? Indeed not. Coleridge and the Powys's alone then, shine like candles in a dark and naughty world?

What are the facts? Jefferies, a country youth, with no money, well read, it is true, but with but few congenial and helpful friends, except his uncle and aunt, stored his mind, found himself and his subject, created a style, and in spite of all difficulties, circumstances, poverty, ill-recognition, and ill health, even in the very shadow of the grave, wrote essays and books that have made his name immortal. A fine achievement on partial illiteracy, sparse literary allusion, and frustrated self-pity

Let it be admitted that Jefferies now and then, had a mind 'at quarrel with itself,' seeking the adjustment and reconciliation of its aspirations and appetites with its environment. Which of us has not? As John Addington Symonds once said. "The fact of thought renders simple materials untenable." Was Jefferies to blame for that? He did not know for long the repose of the philosophic life. Too soon, alas, his golden days faded and the spectres of illness thronged around his lonely path. Marcus Aurelius discovered philosophically that man is a part of the Universe and must live by the laws of the Universe if he is to be good and happy "What place has man in Nature, what in particular is the relation of Thought to Matter?" Jefferies too was tortured by this and never finally resolved his problem. Was it a fault that in his mortal life Jefferies strove to gain a relative conception in the light of Eternity? His constant literary work must have taxed his cerebral energy and led to nervous exhaustion at times. But greater men even than Jefferies have found Time in the pursuit of Eternity an exhausting master. At the last "the phantasmagoria of the world began to fade under the intolerable burden of not knowing whence, where, whither, why!" Jefferies' dying eyes never rested on the final beatitude of Man and Nature reconciled. But nothing is here, in the face of such high tragedy, for sneers or idle criticism. As was said of Saint Francis, "the frustrations and contradictions of Jefferies' life illustrate the difficulties of his task." As for self-discipline, the life of Richard Jefferies is the most shining example of that fine quality known to me.

Page 13 *That he was not a rebel on principle but by circumstances. That neither Hodge nor Toilers have indignation against injustice or sympathy with those underneath.*

The obfuscation shown by the critic is really shocking, for the study of Jefferies' writings, especially *Hodge* and *Toilers*, shows clearly that he progressed from a local outlook on social questions to that of a wider and more catholic one. Both books are full of understanding and sympathy for the under dog. Always, as his general rustic studies show, whilst not foolishly blind to the darker shades of rustic life and bucolic habit, like George Crabbe, he was full of understanding and sympathy for the poor and oppressed. His rebellion was based on principle and on conviction. Read such essays as "Rural Dynamite," "One of the New Voters," or "John Smith's Shanty," none of which Elwin gives, and then realise, not the depths of self pity, which exist only in the mind of the critic, but the human pity Jefferies felt. Elwin does quote the last essay "Hours of Spring." It is most difficult to understand with that example before him, how he ever came to write as he did on Jefferies. Think of the wonderful picture of the old man of ninety being moved on a cart to a new home. The sympathy and understanding shown for his plight, all the more poignant because of its restraint and freedom from sentimentality. Is it the utterance of a self-pitying, querulous man? Then Jefferies goes on to say: "Because my heart beats feebly to-day, my trickling pulse scarcely noting the passing of the time, so much the more do I hope that those to come in future years may see wider and enjoy fuller than I have done; and so much the more gladly would I do all that I could to enlarge the life that shall be then." Is that self-pity? No sympathy with the sufferer from injustice or with the underdog? Read the account of the death of the old worn-out labourer in *Hodge*, or "One of the New Voters," or "Walks in the Wheatfields," (The Wheat is beautiful, but human life is labour) or half a score other essays, or the splendid passages on Jefferies' hopes for the future in the *Story of My Heart*. Then eat your words and put ashes on your head.

Page 14. *That Jefferies resembled Wordsworth in morbid self-pity and discontent*

It is hard indeed to enter the Kingdom of Heaven with Elwin as the hall porter. It would prove a lonely place with Coleridge in full possession, and a monologue on Powys in the background. No Wordsworth! No Jefferies! No — But I forbear. Does Mr. Elwin remember Lord Jeffrey and his "Mr Wordsworth, this will never do!" or Lockhart on John Keats?

Page 15 *That in fiction Jefferies may have sought models in London Society, which shows incompetence, seeing that Charles Reade wrote for the paper early in the Seventies.*

Surely a little knowledge is a dangerous thing, for in point of fact Jefferies *did* contribute fictional studies to *London Society* in the early Seventies, which disposes of Mr Elwin once and for all. I have in my possession not only photostats of these sketches, (I discovered the contributions some years back) but I also own an un-

published letter to Jefferies from the editor of *London Society*, discussing the illustrations of one of these short stories. I pass on without further comment.

Page 16. *That Jefferies was respectable and did not become as a result, entangled with any willing young peasant*

What pompous nonsense! Is this the result of reading too much Victorian fiction? Foolish Jefferies, who did not rise to his opportunities. Jefferies' continence is counted against him. Is it then always respectability that keeps budding nature writers from the embraces of obliging young peasants? No liking for farm work, no love for willing young peasants of the baser sort? Dear me, how odd of Jefferies and how open to critical stricture. He should not indeed, have neglected the willing young peasants of Wiltshire to cultivate "young ladies" who expected marriage. Perhaps the real trouble is not Jefferies himself, but the absence of a sense of humour on the part of his critic. There is nothing worse than the insensibility which denies an understanding of genius. That is truly the death of the spirit.

Page 17 *That the description of Felise in The Dewy Morn, straining 'her beautiful torso' to avoid the hooves of a stallion, suggests sadism, as the luscious description of Felise's beauty indicates sexual repression.*

This is terribly funny. Might it not simply indicate the perfectly natural desire of Felise not to be trampled upon, even by a stallion? In similar circumstances I could easily imagine Mr Malcolm Elwin (still clutching his pipe) straining his manly torso, without in the least conveying to my innocent mind either sadism or sexual repression. I should call it simply a kind of natural prudence on his part to avoid the hooves of savage beasts. To such straits of far-fetched surmise does Freudian jargon reduce its apostles.

Judged by the same tests as Mr Elwin applies to Jefferies' novel *The Dewy Morn*, I should think that quite a number of English novelists of to-day, who deal largely in sexual situations and 'luscious descriptions of the beauty of flesh and form' and those who excel in writing stories full of violence, brutality and crime, would show, if analysed along similar lines, 'deep recesses of sex repression,' 'startling revelations of sadism,' and unexpected hidden talent for crime. I suppose for example that Charles Dickens, who seems to delight in the descriptions of his Fagin and the murder of Nancy by Bill Sikes, was a suppressed pickpocket and frustrated murderer? Certainly, if one delves into the novels of Charles Reade or Wilkie Collins or Sheridan Le Fanu, one would find no doubt, some terribly hidden and dreadful complexes and much would be brought to light to make one shudder at the unconscious. I suggest that there is great scope for amateur psychic critical talent here. Or can it be by some strange

chance, that these dark and terrible facts of neurosis, sadism and sexual frustration, only appear in the depths of the prose fiction of Richard Jefferies, when brought before the eagle eye of the school-master? Stated thus, and the parallel is perfectly fair, how fatuous this line of critical approach is seen to be and how futile. Perhaps, after all, Jefferies may be allowed without fear of psychic complications, his short passages (harmless enough) of the beauty of his heroine Felise, of the dreams and desires of Amaryllis in her garret, and even a playful gambol or two by the stallion Ruy above the 'straining torso' of the village beauty?

Page 18 *The RESPECTABLE* imprint of Smith Elder

Why this coyness towards the imprint of one of the leading publishers of the Nineteenth Century?

Page 18. *These books afford ample justification for Henley calling him 'a reporter of genius and a kind of literary Leatherstocking'*

What a comment when one realises that 'these books' include among others, *Nature Near London*, *The Open Air*, *the Life of the Fields* and *Field and Hedgerow*, containing "the Pageant of Summer", "Meadow Thoughts", "Wild Flowers", "Winds of Heaven", "Hours of Spring", "Walks in the Wheatfields," and "Nature in the Louvre!" The fruit of a literary Leather-stockings! Could stolid pedantry wreak further misunderstanding than this?

I quote a few sentences by Edward Thomas which apply, not even to Jefferies' greatest writings, but to the four unfeigned early country books of his nonage. What a contrast to the rhetoric of *The Essential Jefferies* ! —

"In these four books, from The Gamekeeper to The Great Estate, for almost the first time in English literature a pure countryman reveals his life and neighbourhood. No man could be neglected who has so much knowledge which it is impossible to acquire by effort and time alone; his power of showing the joy in things, and of making them a means to joy, gives him still higher claims. Thus, at his best Jefferies writes as if his hand had in it part of that spirit which builds the hills and lights the stars over them: in his veins are the saps of oak and ash and elm, the blood of things that run and fly and creep. He still plays his part in Nature's office of granting health, and hearty pleasure, and consolation, and delights of the senses and of the spirit, to men."

The fruit of a literary Leather-stockings ?

Pages 20-21 *That Jefferies in illness had no resources and was occupied with self-pity and resentment. He lacked the gallantry of Powys, and unlike him, did not make the most of his time.*

What 'Never, Never Land' is this? It is surely the most fantastic charge of all? It is entirely refuted by the facts of Jefferies' last years. Tortured by the inevitable and terrible sufferings of a mortal disease, he faced his approaching end with great courage and fortitude. Now and then, a cry of anguish was wrung from his heart, and sorrow should be felt that it was so and that this man of courage

with so fine a spirit should thus suffer With the courage of Llewelyn Powys but with greater genius, Jefferies is an example of heroic endurance. 'Pity has a human face', and 'a tear is an intellectual thing' Does Mr Elwin understand that ?

In the midst of his pain, when no longer able to hold a pen, Jefferies continued to dictate essays, some of the finest he ever wrote, to his patient and helpful wife, and with trembling fingers, to write with pencil in his note-books, to within a few days of the end. They lie before me now and the last entry runs "I dream of Ideality" Furthermore, Mrs. Jefferies, who lived until 1926, Jefferies' son who died in 1942 and the artist friend J. W. North, a trustee of the Jefferies' Fund, all bore witness to his patience and kindness under conditions of suffering that would have tried most men to the depths. Self-pity, resentment Let it be reserved for any man who can write in this way of Jefferies in his struggle against the monsters of disease, neglect and poverty.

Page 22. *Greene Ferne Farm 'is a pale shadow' of those by Charles Garvice.*

When Dr. Johnson remarked that no one was ever written down except by himself he must have been thinking of literary critics, writing about something they neither understand nor appreciate. Here is one however who does know, and he writes "Among the novels the exquisite *Greene Ferne Farm*." Henry Williamson answers Elwin.

Page 23. *That Jefferies did not understand how Trollope devised or Dickens made notes*

But that is exactly what Jefferies did, in his own way, in his note-books and elsewhere.

Page 24. *That Jefferies was always sick in mind.*

Not in the least. Sick in body for the last year or two. As for Jefferies' mind, many years' study of his life and writings allow me to apply to him Buckle's words about Adam Smith "His capacious and insatiable mind, deeming that nothing had been done while aught remained to do."

Page 24. *That his own emotions prevented him from interest in those of his Fictional Characters.*

The truth is the other way round. Jefferies was so deeply interested and absorbed in the emotions of his characters, Iden, Amaryllis and Felise that his art and narrative suffer as a consequence.

Page 25 *That resentment against circumstances and destructive self-pity are dominant in Jefferies' life and writings.*

Evidence would be welcome, not mere assertion. But if it be so, one may indeed ask, why waste time editing the work of such

a grumbler and self excoriator? What is really dominant in Jefferies is courage and fortitude in the face of suffering and difficulty. The flame of his mind, in spite of bodily weakness, shone until the end. The last essays, written in the very shadow of death, are the best.

Page 26. *That D. H. Lawrence wondered if 'Jefferies winced away from The Story of My Heart, after he had written it.*

Another blank shot. Jefferies did nothing of the sort. Far from it. His last four note-books in the closing months of his life, show that he intended to enlarge the *Story*, for they are full of notes along similar lines. Even the consolation that Lawrence may be right is denied to the hapless Elwin.

Page 26. *That self-pity smothered Jefferies' spirit.*

A morass of misunderstanding has smothered the pen of Mr. Elwin. A little evidence of this self-pity will be welcome instead of its constant and wearisome reiteration. Mr. Elwin has glimpsed a Jefferies' mirage and has not reached the oasis of truth as a result, but has drunk the brackish waters of Freudian criticism and sunk in a desert of his own devising.

Page 26. *That the first purpose of life is happiness and Jefferies was a miserably unhappy man.*

Sir William Beach Thomas has said that "Jefferies' love of beauty brought him extreme joy. He knew Wordsworth's 'deep power of joy' and carried Raleigh's 'scrip of joy'. 'He always had a 'hearth of thought' and memory at which he warmed his hands." Sir William adds that the "criticism evinces a strange inability to understand the essential Jefferies and therefore the essential country-man."

If we consider the question of happiness, which Elwin says was denied to Jefferies, we know that this is a misunderstanding of his whole life. But we may go on to ask, what is happiness, and who is entirely happy in the world? On the whole, the earth seems more full of misery than of happiness. Every human being has periods of joy, and those more capable of spiritual experience know ecstasy. But such golden moments alternate with longer periods of dullness, disillusion and even despair! What critic dare lecture Richard Jefferies if, at times, he shared the common lot and knew the agony that loads the intolerable day, and haunts the dreadful night? To misunderstand this and yet at the same time to censure it, brings to mind what was said of Bourget the novelist, that he 'is so conscientious and painfully laboured that it is like eating acrid sawdust.'

But is the 'first purpose of life happiness?' The hedonistic philosophy has been denied by many of earth's greatest and best. In *Summa Contra Gentiles* Aquinas says. "Now in this life there is no

sure stability. Therefore man's ultimate happiness cannot be in this life." And again: "Happiness does not consist in bodily good as its object. In respect to his soul man desires to know something."

Man's earthly life involves the existence of another transcendental world. There must be found a place for the mystery of Life and Time. The task of true mysticism is to bring a sense of the Eternal and the Infinite back into daily life. Thus Calvin speaks of "The manifold agility of the soul, which enables it to take a survey of heaven and earth, to join the past and the present; to retain the memory of things heard long ago, to conceive of whatever it choose by the help of imagination; its ingenuity, also, in the invention of such admirable arts, are certain proofs of the divinity of man."

Indeed, if the first purpose of life be happiness, then few there be that follow it. The Greeks thought that the first purpose of life was virtue, the Saints goodness, and to the soldier the first purpose must needs be courage. To make happiness the first purpose is to poison life at its spring. Nor can it be achieved by so doing, for happiness eludes the grasping hand that would seize her flying hem. She is a shy and solitary maid who comes only to those who do not seek her directly, but who devote their lives to other, finer, and more selfless purposes. To the astronomer in his lonely watch-tower, to the poet in his silent chamber of imagery, to the philosopher in his study, to the man of science in his laboratory, to Jefferies on his hill at Liddington, preoccupied with other thoughts and things than the mere pursuit of happiness: to all these seekers happiness may come. I sought her not, but lo, she is here! And Jefferies, because he had integrity of mind and followed his Demon, knew happiness, great happiness at times, but did not make her his first purpose. He believed so passionately in truth that he would follow it wherever it led. Like Socrates, he cared for integrity. He knew that 'power and place,' cities and empires and earthly glory, are nothing but vanity. Nor did he say with the worldly in the words of Horace: *Rem facias, rem Si possis recte si non quocunque modo rem*. "Make money, man! By fair means if you can; if not, by any means, make money, man!" Jefferies had heard Truth tell that Beauty is a flower, Fame a breath, and Happiness a dream, and that only Goodness, Virtue and Courage are immortal. Ah blind and unhappy critic, not to have learnt that universal and salutary lesson.

III

The whole introduction shows an extraordinary and painful critical obtuseness to the real meaning and outcome of the writings of Richard Jefferies. Every little habit, every incident, is related to Jefferies' disadvantage. Irony, however wounding, which might have enlivened the dull pages of this heavy prose, is absent; and if

one thing is more apparent than another, it is a complete lack of a sense of humour, or of the appreciation of the Comic Spirit, which George Meredith called with truth, 'the Sword of Commonsense.'

Mr Elwin is presumptuous in thinking that he can summarize and pigeon-hole Richard Jefferies, or write about him like a school-master chiding an erring pupil brought before him for misbehaviour. However long we study the best of Jefferies, his later essays, or the *Story of My Heart* and the Note-books, we can never feel that we have exhausted his powers. His passionate, protean, creative personality baffles and eludes our search. He was a forward-looking man, a prophet of the future, he cannot be measured by our petty modern foot rules. His was a Timeless Spirit, "tameless, and swift and proud." He is with Blake and Shelley, a dedicated man. Can a few commonplace events in a day to day life measure the souls of such men, or that of any man? Shall we not rather range ourselves with Hamlet, who thought he could be bounded in a nut-shell and yet count himself a king of infinite space?

Not to appreciate Jefferies or his vision in the presence of his best writings is to be "like the base Indian who threw a pearl away, richer than all his tribe." Nor is it a matter for self-complacency

IV

Whilst writing this short essay I wondered what it would look like to apply the de-bunking, no-nonsense method of denigration, which became so fashionable a few years ago, the quasi-scientific sludge system, which rigorously avoids sentiment, appreciation and understanding of genius, what it would look like to apply this method to a handful of English writers of the past, hitherto thought by some misguided sentimentalists and cranks to be truly great! How would the jargon go? Possibly something like this! *Coleridge* was a prosy bore, an endless word spinner, a wordy, indecisive, tiresome fellow. He neglected his wife and left his children to the care of others. He was so helpless and incompetent that on a country walk, or a London one for that matter, he could not even keep to one side of the road, but wobbled about, as indeed, he did in life generally. Moreover, as well as writing long dull, unreadable books, he was the hopeless slave of opium. *Wordsworth*! A bumbling uncouth countryman, always burbling about nature but not fond of work on the farm. This 'morbid' and self-pitying fellow, full of 'discontent' was uxoriously fond of his sister and she of him, but in his selfish discontent, he walked her off her feet. He was a maudlin poet who wrote at length of idiot boys and female peasants, posing as a moralist in youth, while he betrayed a 'willing' French girl behind the scenes. *De Quincey*! a half-crazy, selfish loon, who, consorting on a doorstep with a London prostitute, later wrote 'dithyrambs of emotional torment'

to tell posterity all about it. He was an out-of-elbows literary hack, who lived, or rather pigged it in a cottage in the Lake District, knee deep in papers, books and MSS. scattered pell mell all around, while he drownded and drooled stupid with opium. *Shelley!* a disobedient son, a crazy schoolboy and disloyal undergraduate, expelled his college for Atheism. who drove one young loving woman to a suicide's grave and seduced the daughter of the writer he called friend and master. A revolutionary incendiary *Byron!* The son of a vociferous and foolish termagant, and the grandson of a lecherous old black-guard. Club-footed but proud as Lucifer Driven from England by the just anger of his respectable but outraged fellow country-men. Guilty of incest and always a great womanizer A bad husband, a treacherous friend. In short, a complete bounder *Carlyle!* An impotent querulous old scold, who preached golden silence in many turgid volumes. *Ruskin!* Another impotent, terribly vocal, much of a lunatic who thought himself a heaven-sent teacher of men. *Poe*, a drunken little runt; a waster who died soon after being pulled out of an American city gutter *Rossetti!* So thin-skinned he developed a persecution mania when criticised. Neglected his wife, who took poison, while he took drugs. *Francis Thompson!* A wastrel son who failed for medicine many times, ran away from home and found his natural place on the Embankment 'among social outcasts and reprobates.' Rotten with drugs and drink, he wrote reams of unintelligible verse on sugar paper, interspersed with maudlin fits of monastic repentance. What a pretty lot, judged by the censorious, free from sentiment, rub-a-dub school of neo-Nordau critics. What miserable squirming mis-behaving little insects seen under the Freudian microscope. Which of us (who are not men of genius), judged in this way, but would come out of the inquisition with bedraggled feathers Really, what nonsense it all is, how unfair! Facile no doubt with a surface and shallow plausibility But to such criticism swans may seem to be geese and giants pigmies, and the sweetest nightingale, a small brown bird making a noise. There's nothing *odd* but thinking makes it so, and in short, what is all this except the pompous ex-cathedra stuff fathered by Max Nordau long ago, which G.B.S. in his prime blew sky-high.

De quibus ignoras tace. (Hold your tongue about things that you know nothing about), is a Latin saying, which some super critics of Richard Jefferies would be wise to heed.