In the Footprints of Richard Jefferies
By Philip Edward Thomas

This article first appeared in the New Age *on 2 April 1896. The introduction was written by W.J. Keith in December 1984 who believed that it is the first essay on Jefferies that Edward Thomas published.*

Introduction

The following essay, signed Philip Edward Thomas, appeared in the *New Age* on 2 April 1896. I came across a reference to it quite accidentally, and it seems to have escaped the attention of earlier commentators on either Thomas or Jefferies. It is one of Thomas's earliest articles, and I believe it to be the first essay on Jefferies that he published.

The background to its composition can be reconstructed quite easily. Thomas had been familiar with the Swindon district every since his childhood when he used to spend holidays there with his aunt and grandmother. In 1895 Thomas left Westminster School, and almost immediately went on a visit to Swindon which he recorded in "A Diary in English Fields and Woods," later

published in *The Woodland Life* (1897).

Meanwhile, through the good offices of James Ashcroft Noble the writer and literary critic whose daughter Helen was to become Thomas's wife, he had begun to find an outlet for his essays in such periodicals as the *Academy*, the *Speaker* and the *New Age*. The essay in question was almost certainly written on a further visit to Swindon that Thomas made in March 1896. In her memoir *As It Was*, Helen records tenderly: " During his absence in Wiltshire [EdwardJ sent me boxes of wild flowers, and a thrust's egg — the first he had found " (1956 ed., p.26). But the visit had an unhappy sequel.

Thomas returned at the end of March to find Helen's father seriously ill. He died within a day or so of this essay's being published, and it may well be that the essay was forgotten about in the personal crisis or later neglected because of the painful memories associated with it.

"In the Footprints of Richard Jefferies" is valuable because it gives us a fresh and charming picture of Coate and environs eight and a half years after Jefferies death. Apart from one error (the Orion of *The Amateur Poacher* was not a shepherd), it offers an accurate account of its subject, and is written in a style closer to Jefferies' own that the more elaborate, bejewelled prose that Thomas generally affected in his early writings. It should prove of special interest to those familiar both with Jefferies and with his countryside.

W. J. Keith December 1984

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Coate is a name which has probably little significance for the mass of Englishmen; yet it may well be conjectured that this little hamlet will one day attain the celebrity, not to say sanctity, new enjoyed by the Hampshire village of Selborne. For Coate is the birthplace of Richard Jefferies.

We set out on a pilgrimage, beginning with a journey by rail to Swindon Junction—where the traveller has no longer to wait for the "ten minutes," familiar but not dear in the days of old.[1] From the railway station we go up the steep hill leading to the "Old Town," passing on the way a stone-built house in Victoria-street, where Jefferies lived for some time after his marriage.[2] We are here surrounded by many associations connected with the writer, who had to die in order to give life to his works. His friend Mr. William Morris, mentioned, in Besant's *Eulogy*, a former editor of the

[1] From 1842 to 1895 all trains had to make a compulsory ten minutes refreshment stop at Swindon station. Under the terms of leasing the Swindon Junction Hotel and Refreshment Rooms, the lessees had secured this arrangement that was to run for 99 years. In 1895 the GWR bought out the hotel company for £100,000 and dropped the 10 minute break.

[2] Jefferies only lived in Old Town for a year from late April 1875.

Swindon Advertiser, had his offices in the same street; and close at hand is the office of the *North Wilts Herald,* on which Jefferies served his apprenticeship as a reporter.

Leaving the town, we first take to the fields by a narrow stile near "The Lawn," the residence of "Squire Goddard." The footpath, often trod by Jefferies himself, winds pleasantly athwart broad undulating fields of pasture and mowing grass, through stiles and gateways, past dense hedges with their ash trees and pollard willows, and after a few minutes' walk the place of our pilgrimage comes in sight. The path rejoins the main road, and almost immediately opposite is Coate Farm, where Jefferies first saw the light. By no means a striding farmstead, it is almost hidden by a high brick wall and a thick screen of pollarded limes, though actually facing the highway leading from Swindon to Marlborough. The gateway, low and arched, is guarded by lilac and laburnum, and near at hand are the trees of the orchard. The old-fashioned, appearance of the house is somewhat impaired by the slated roof, but the "skilling" and cluster of farm-buildings are thatched and moss grown, with ivy clinging to their weather-stained walls. Under the eaves, as of old, martins have placed their mud nests, and all through the village they are visible almost at every turn.

Coate itself, lying at the foot of the Liddington Hills, is a straggling little place with quaint old cottages, a modernised inn, called the "Sun," and farmhouses standing some way back from the road. By the roadside is the narrow brooklet in which Jefferies was delighted to note an especial charm of glitter, and where great yellow marigolds grew in May amid the flags at the water-side.

At the back of the Farm, and hidden by close-growing ash and chestnut, lies the Reservoir, styled more poetically by Jefferies "the mere," embosomed among swelling meadows and shadowing trees. Here in the "old punt" the youthful Jefferies loved to wander, searching for "Calypso's cave ... and the Immortals ... hiding somewhere still in the woods."[3] One recognises the place in the passage where he describes the voyage in the rickety boat with "Orion" the shepherd.[4]

> Past the low but steep bluff of sand, rising sheer out of the water, drilled with sand martins' holes and topped by a sapling oak in the midst of a great furze bush. ... Past the barley that came down to the willows by the shore, ripe and white under the bright sunshine, but yonder beneath the shadow of the elms with a pale tint of amber. Past broad rising meadows, where under the oaks on the upper ground the cattle were idly lying out of the sultry heat. Then the barren islands strewn with stones and mussel-shells glistening in the sunshine. ... till presently she floated into the bay beneath the firs. There a dark shadow hung over the black water—still and silent; so still that even the aspens rested from their rustling.[5]

These words are charmingly true to the life as we float upon the broad bosom of the lake with its osier islets and dense beds of lofty iris. Round about the waterside is many a nook where the youthful nature-lover often dreamed and pondered, shadowed by a leaf-woven canopy, and with the

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[3] *The Amateur Poacher* by Richard Jefferies, 1879, Ch 2.

[4] Orion was not a shepherd but a travelling companion in *The Amateur Poacher,* Ch1: "I call him Orion because he was a hunter and had a famous dog."

[5] *The Amateur Poacher,* Ch2.

fragrance of woodbine drifting in through the hawthorns. Or again, along the rushy bank, where the greensward stretches to the water's edge, decked with cuckoo flowers and forget-me-nots, he was wont to loiter, watching the wavelets lapping the low marge or the pennon willow leaves flashing in the sun.

Away on the southern horizon the ridge of Liddington Hills is clearly outlined, marked by a clump of storm-driven beeches, known as a landmark for miles around. Every year the bird-nesters search the "Plain" (or plateau) for lapwings' eggs, and it was here and in the immediate neighbourhood, lying on the slopes of the ancient tumuli, that Jefferies meditated the thoughts expressed in *The Story of My Heart*. After the exhilarating ascent, he says:

> There was an intrenchment on the summit, and going down into the fosse, I walked round it slowly to recover breath. On the south-western side there was a spot where the outer bank had partially slipped, leaving a gap. There the view was over a broad plain beautiful with wheat, and inclosed by a perfect amphitheatre of green hills. ... Woods hid the scattered hamlets, so that I was quite alone.[6]

There, then, and close at hand, Jefferies lived some of the most exalted moments of his life.

In another direction lies Burderop Wood, where the keepers were doubtless intimate acquaintances of Jefferies and his unconscious models. A narrow footway leads to a hillside cluster of cottages, and on every hand Spring scatters her daintiest gifts. Pale wind anemones spangle the slopes and hedgemounds, and the violet hides amid the herbage growing about the stately ash and far-spreading oaks. In June, about the open glades grown with sweet turf and bracken, we have seen the ghostly nightjar wheel, and the kestrel hover in his mid-day course. On the opposite side of Burderop, and well known to all the country-side, is Ladder Hill, with its steep primrose-dappled inclines and grass carpets pranked with exquisite bird's-foot lotus, whose beauties Jefferies so eloquently celebrates. The huge time-stained boulders that are met with here and there form convenient resting-places after the climb, and all around at midsummer the brier hedges are flushed with sweet wild roses.

Nestling on the sides of the downs are hill villages whither Jefferies wandered in his endless walks. Such are Chiseldon and Wroughton. About the thyme-scented hill-tops overlooking these hamlets are lanes and field-paths that lead the wanderer on many a delightful ramble. Here among the trees, stirring from the breath of the roving wind, and beneath the hot sun-glow, we may fitly remember the words and spirit of *The Amateur Poacher*: "A something that the ancients called divine may be found and felt there."[7]

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[6] *The Story of My Heart* by Richard Jefferies, 1883.
[7] The final sentence from *The Amateur Poacher*.