

Richard Jefferies' Father

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This signed article by Professor Keith was completed in November, 1966.

Readers of *Richard Jefferies: Man of the Fields* by Samuel J. Looker and Crichton Porteous (London: John Baker, 1965) and my *Richard Jefferies: A Critical Study* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965) may be struck by the opposing impressions of Jefferies' father, James Luckett Jefferies, which emerge from the two books. It is unlikely that any new material will now appear that will help us towards a fuller understanding of the man, but a reconsideration of the available evidence can, I believe, make some progress towards clarifying what seems at first sight to be two contradictory assessments.

In my own book I followed the traditional view, accepting the character of Iden in *Amaryllis at the Fair* as a portrait of the father,¹ and quoting an account by Miss F.C. Hall, cousin of Richard Jefferies, bearing witness to the father's extreme affection for Coate Farm ('a little Naboth's vineyard')² I might also have quoted the account by a relative, possibly Richard's younger brother Henry, which Walter Besant reproduces in his *Eulogy of Richard Jefferies*;

The garden, the orchard, the hedges of the fields were always his chief delight; he had planted many a tree round and about his farm. Not a single bird that flew but he knew, and could tell its history; if you walked with him, as Dick often did, and as I have occasionally done, through the fields, and heard him expatiate—quietly enough—on the trees and flowers, you would not be surprised at the turn taken by his son's genius.³

Further support for this interpretation of the father's character can be gained from an interview with another brother, Charles, recorded in the *Pall Mall Gazette* (22 Sept. 1891):

My father always manifested a love of reading, which he early instilled into us as boys. His favourite volumes were the Bible and Shakespeare, and alternately he regularly read to us from their pages, explaining and

¹ Edward Thomas, in his *Richard Jefferies; His Life and Work* (London: Hutchinson, 1909), claims that this tradition was corroborated by 'local memory' (p.29).

² See 'Jefferies Luckett' [F.C. Hall], 'The Forbears of Richard Jefferies', *Country Life*, XXIII. March 14, 1908, 375.

³ Quoted in Walter Besant, *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1888), p.26.

elucidating as he went on. Richard early in life emulated my father's pleasure in reading.⁴

Jefferies himself offered a similar assessment—not, it may be noted, in print but in a private letter to the publisher George Bentley, where he is significantly defending the consistency of *Iden* by reference to his own father. James Lockett was, he claimed, 'a scholar, a great reader with a considerable library of the best authors, and above all the keenest observation of nature and of natural phenomena'.⁵

On the other hand, the Looker-Porteous biography, published while my own book was in the press, takes a very different view. This is based almost entirely upon three hitherto unpublished letters written by the father, and the following passages, extracted from them, certainly suggest a character totally unlike the traditional figure. In one he insists: 'I did not see Richard's writings or take any delight in them. . . . How he could think of describing Coate as such a pleasant place and deceive so I could not imagine.' In another he writes: 'Of all places in Old England Coate was the most despicable when I was a boy and spoke of [as] such by all. In other passages he criticises Coate Farm ('we were all so glad to get away') and demonstrates an attitude to his son's literary success that varies from deliberate unconcern to decidedly grudging admiration.⁶

These letters cast doubt on the traditional view in at least two ways. Not only is the father's yeoman-like devotion to the land which he owned and farmed seriously questioned (of Coate Farm he comments that 'it was not worthy of the name of Farm'), but the ungrammatical constructions, illogical statements and generally ill-tempered tone contrast oddly with the impression that Jefferies himself seemed anxious to offer of a well-educated, sensitive and kindly if impractical farmer. Are we to see Jefferies' own statements, and those of his relatives, as loyal and understandable yet misguided attempts to initiate a family myth in the face of embarrassingly curious biographers? Does the James Lockett Jefferies of these letters reveal a reality which it seemed necessary or desirable to obscure?

The following facts need to be taken into consideration. First, when Walter Besant's volume was published, when the interview in the *Pall Mall Gazette* first appeared, James Lockett Jefferies was still alive. It is regrettable that neither Besant nor H.S. Salt made any attempt to interview the father at this time, though they knew perfectly well that he was still alive. Mrs. Jefferies and the

⁴ Quoted in H.S. Salt, *Richard Jefferies: His Life and Ideals* (London: Fiffeld, 1905), p. 7.

⁵ Richard Jefferies, *Field and Farm* (London: Hioenix House, 1957), p.41. It may be significant that in a photograph reproduced in Thomas, facing p. 86, James Lockett Jefferies is seated with an impressively thick book at his elbow.

⁶ See Samuel J. Looker and Crichton Porteous, *Richard Jefferies. Man of the Fields* (London: John Baker, 1965), pp.3–6.

brothers were possibly uncooperative concerning his whereabouts, but it seems unlikely that an attempt would have been made to offer a woefully inaccurate account of the writer's relations with his father when the possibility existed that such an account could be shattered by direct inquiry.⁷ The other fact that needs emphasis is that the three letters in question were written by James Luckett at the age of eighty, only a few weeks before his own death in 1896. At this time Richard had been dead for nine years, the mother had recently died, and the 'old house at Coate' had been sold for some eighteen years. The letters are rambling, and contain a number of obvious contradictions of fact and errors of logic that might well be explained by incipient senility. The grammatical errors and lack of punctuation may also be indicative of failing powers, and it would be unfair to assume that these letters are trustworthy evidence applicable to the mature man. Moreover, the failure of the small-holding at Coate may well have caused a general bitterness that has coloured and distorted the impressions of earlier days.

But our speculations can go further. Miss F.C. Hall wrote her later article, 'The Forbears of Richard Jefferies', with the deliberate aim 'to give Richard's father his due' and to refute 'such things as were hurtful or misleading' in Besant's biography.⁸ Now Besant's account would not strike the average reader as being in any way critical; indeed, James Luckett emerges as an impressive and sympathetic figure. Miss Hall seems unduly sensitive on this subject, but her attitude ironically draws attention to other traits which may well be of significance.

At one point, in referring to James Luckett, she alludes to 'the family trait of obstinacy' and this can be traced in her account through four generations from Richard's great-grandfather to himself. It was particularly noticeable in the father. She admits that he rebelled against the 'repression' of the home, that he 'never got on well with his father' (the Grandfather Iden of *Amaryllis*), and that his going to America in 1837 was an attempt to escape from the life at home. This bitterness is echoed in that memorable scene in *Amaryllis at the Fair*, where Iden obstinately refuses to visit the grandfather on his birthday. Indeed, once we begin to look more closely, we notice a number of incidents in Jefferies' last work of fiction which suggest a by no means idealised portrait, and these too may have biographical origins. Thus the first contribution Iden makes to the novel is 'a sound like a growl' (Everyman Edition, p.203), and the whole opening conversation displays elements of gruff bitterness as well as keen sensitivity (the bitterness is, indeed, specifically linked to the sensitivity, his failure being a result of his artistic but impractical nature). Of *Amaryllis*' flowers

⁷ Again, Jefferies' own description was in a private letter which his relatives (his wife excepted) were not in a position to have seen. The fact that this agrees with the other accounts seems to me a strong argument in favour of the traditional view.

⁸ See 'Jefferies Luckett', 375.

he comments: 'Trumpy rubbish—mean to dig 'em all up—would if I had the time . . . Have 'em carted out and drowed away—do for ashes to drow on the fields' (p.204). Later, when one of her drawings has been returned by an editor, he seriously wounds Amaryllis' feelings by exclaiming: 'Better drow that there fool stuff in the vire', and Jefferies sums up his attitude as 'growl, mutter, growl' (p.302). At such moments Iden is not all that far removed from the ill-tempered writer of the letters.

To isolate these incidents is, of course, to distort Jefferies' artistic effect, but it is curious how easily they are forgotten by readers familiar with the more sympathetic scenes in which he dozes in the armchair after dinner, paddles in the meadow, or watches the construction of his 'splendid gate'(p.341). I would suggest that Jefferies derived both aspects of Iden from his father, that his relatives have, understandably, emphasised the more endearing side, and that the letters reproduced by Looker and Porteous bear witness to the more crotchety aspects of his character which may well have intensified as he grew older.

Thus I believe that the truth lies, as one might expect, somewhere between the two extremes. It is worth remembering that Edward Thomas described the father as 'a funny-tempered man, full of unexpected likes and dislikes'. This seems fair. The newly published evidence suggests that the traditional view must be somewhat modified, but I cannot agree with the Looker-Porteous biography that the most detailed of the three letters 'better than anything else indicates the type of man James Luckett Jefferies was'. This seriously neglects the other side to the question. I have tried to show that it is possible, at least to some extent, to reconcile the two assessments, and the result is that James Luckett Jefferies emerges, paradoxically, as a more complex and interesting figure. This is as it should be, since he owes the fact of his remembrance to the achievements of his even more complex and interesting son.