

Talks and Articles No. 143
Richard Jefferies' Somerset Venture

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Red Deer, 'Summer in Somerset', 'The Otter in Somerset', 'The Water Colley', and 'By the Exe' are the five pieces of work that resulted from Richard Jefferies' visit to Somerset. The year was 1883; in 1832 Jefferies had had four expensive operations and had not been able to make much money. He had moved from Surbiton to Lorna Road, Brighton. By 1883, he felt much better and on 15 May (NB XI f.31) had finished the MS of *The Story of My Heart*. On 28 May he posted off the MS to Chatto and Windus, hoping they would publish it. Then he set off for Somerset. On the 15th June returned to Brighton (NB XI f.58). So, between 28 May and 15 June, a maximum of 19 days, he was away in Somerset, leaving Jessie at home with Harold and Phyllis, and expecting the new baby. *Red Deer* was finished by 29 July (NB XI f.58). 'Summer in Somerset' was written, but not published, by September. August and September saw the publication of the other three essays.

There were three men, Comyns Carr, J.W. North, and C.P. Scott, who made this enterprise possible, and who went on to be true friends to Jefferies for the four remaining years of his life. Also, I want to put you, as it were, in a silent helicopter—Jefferies' words are 'drifted like a leaf'—and take you swiftly over the places he went to, to give you some idea of how he might have managed to cover so much in such a short time.

Joseph Comyns Carr, to whom Jefferies gave a copy of *Red Deer*, refers briefly to Jefferies in his own autobiographical book *Some Eminent Victorians*, 1908. He had the sort of successful career in journalism and art that Jefferies might have aspired to in the mid-1870s. Carr was born in 1849 (a few months younger than Jefferies) seventh of ten children, and half Irish. After he left school at sixteen, his father put him in the Stock Exchange but he did not like that and left to read for the Bar. As a barrister he soon found that he could earn more money by writing articles than by appearing in court. In 1873 he fell in love and, on the strength of being made art critic of the *Pall Mall Gazette* he was able to marry. He went on to be the dramatic critic and art critic of various papers, a director of the Grosvenor Gallery, a co-founder of the New Gallery, and Editor of the *English Illustrated Magazine*. He was a witty, energetic, popular man, much in

demand, apparently, as an after-dinner speaker. He does not say when he first met Jefferies but it would most probably have been when both of them were writing for the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Carr as art critic and Jefferies as an expert on rural matters.

In 1883, Macmillans decided to launch a new illustrated magazine, *The English Illustrated Magazine* and they made Comyns Carr its editor. One of their schemes was to include in each issue a well-written account of a county, or a particular area, in the British isles, complete with black and white illustrations. For example they did Bath, Cornwall, The Fens, The Lake District, and so on. So Carr had to find someone to write about Somerset and an artist to illustrate it. Probably Carr already knew Jefferies and we know he knew North because he refers to him as 'my friend' in his book, and both of them were friends and admirers of Fred Walker, another painter who died young. North was a painter and illustrator of books and Carr was an art critic so a friendship between them would not be surprising.

North had been living in Somerset since 1865, if not earlier, and his detailed knowledge of the Quantocks, and other parts of the county of Somerset, would have made Carr choose him. Jefferies, of course, did not know Somerset but he had already described Wiltshire, Surrey and Sussex, and North could show him around. Whether this was how it came about is supposition, but Jefferies wrote the text of 'Summer in Somerset' and North did the line drawings.

There is no evidence that North and Jefferies knew each other before the Somerset venture. They might have met in the offices of a London publisher. Jefferies' friends tended to be much older than him. Carr was a year younger, North was six years older, while Scott was just two years older. Nor was North born into the purple, indeed he not only had to support himself, but he supported his father and mother, and paid for one brother's education, and paid the heavy medical expenses of another brother.

There are two or three books about Comyns Carr but there is no book about North. We know a fair amount about him though because he befriended Fred Walker, who was born in 1840 and died of TB in 1875. North, as a bachelor, lodged with a widow, a Mrs Hannah Thorne, and in 1868 Walker joined North when Mrs Thorne was the tenant of Higher Halsway Farm very close to a great old house usually referred to as Halsway Court of which she also had charge. Both North and Walker painted this picturesque house which is still standing, though much restored.



Halsway Court by J W North



'The Old Gate', oil painting by Fred Walker

When Mrs Thorne was asked to leave, she rented another large manor house, this time in Woolston, 2 or 3 miles from Halsway (now called Woolston Grange and also much altered) and North and Walker followed her there. After Walker's death in 1875, his brother-in-law used his letters as the basis of a

biography and this is how we come to know so much about North's habits. The 1881 census put Mrs Thorne at Bicknoller, so, unless Mrs Thorne had moved again by 1883, this must be where Jefferies stayed when he came to join North. Mrs Thorne is said to have occupied part of Lock's Farm, later called Lock's House.

Charles Prestwich Scott born in 1846 was aged only 26 when he became Editor of the *Manchester Guardian* in 1872 and remained editor until 1929. The Dictionary of National Biography says of him: 'He gave the paper serious standing as a critic of arts and letters and raised it to a leading place as a moral force in world politics.' No letters between Jefferies and Scott are known for the year 1883 so it is not known for certain how Jefferies came to contribute the two articles to the *Manchester Guardian*—'The Otter in Somerset' and 'The Water Colley'. It was, perhaps, through Joseph Comyns Carr. Carr was, by this time, art critic for the *Manchester Guardian* and possibly he negotiated some work for Jefferies with the paper. We do not know of any work by Jefferies earlier than this in the *Manchester Guardian*. Carr may also have been able to advance some of the fee, either for the *Guardian* work or the *EIM* work towards Jefferies' expenses in Somerset. By February 1884, Jefferies and Scott are corresponding and Jefferies is sending more work.

For Jefferies, starting in Brighton, it meant a longish train journey to Somerset, probably via Taunton. The line from Taunton to Watchet in 1883 had stations at Crowcombe and Stogumber. We know, from the book about Walker, that North used these stations and Jefferies probably got off at Stogumber. From there it is only about 2 miles to Bicknoller. They may have walked, or taken a fly, or got a boy to carry the bag to Lock's farm. If Bicknoller then was anything like Bicknoller now, a pleasanter spot could not be imagined, and they would have had to pass through or near Vellow, which is where Curdon Farm lay—the one drawn by North as the last illustration to 'Summer in Somerset'.

Jefferies' visit probably began with North, using Bicknoller as a base. The places Jefferies mentions in the Quantocks are all within a 4-mile radius of Bicknoller and though he does not even name Bicknoller, it can be recognised from his description.

The cross in the street is at Crowcombe, the cross in a churchyard, with a yew tree and stocks has been identified as at Bicknoller. North, who had painted in the area since 1865, knew exactly what was worth looking at, and so Jefferies went, as he usually tells us, to Crowcombe, Stogumber, Holford Glen, Wills Neck, (and maybe West Bagborough nearby) Woolston, Dunster, Selworthy, Holnicote, Watchet, and probably also Minehead. He must also have gone to Monksilver where Combe Sydenham is—the subject of 'A Manor House in Deerland'.

Jefferies had nineteen days at most in Somerset and two of them would have been spent travelling there and back. In addition to exploring the Quantocks, he also spent time alone, apparently, looking for the deer, and he passed some days at Exford, where he learned all about the deer from the Heal family, fished, and travelled about again. The dates 6th and 7th June appear in his notebook XI with 'deer' against the 6th and 'trout' against the 7th; also the address of a hotel in Porlock.

So he arrived on 28 May, probably stayed in Bicknoller with North until 2 or 3 June, that is 6 clear days; then on 4 June he set off for Porlock and the region inland until 7 June when he moved to Exford. He might have stayed there until 12 or 13 June when he returned to Bicknoller to catch his train on the 15th. This is a rough timetable.

When he left Bicknoller he went farther west, in fact right to the Somerset and Devon border which curves in, near the coast, to allocate Lynton and Lynmouth to Devon. It was too far to walk so he may have used a driver with a horse and trap as he refers in 'Summer in Somerset' to someone driving away 'in reckless Somerset style' (p.38). Here, he was studying not the recognised beauty spots but the deer, their habits, and their favourite country. His notebook for this time mentions a hotel in Porlock, which he might have stayed at, and it also mentions Nicolas Snow of Oare. Snow was a famous and well-loved man of those parts with his own pack of hounds, though he was chiefly interested in fox-hunting. Jefferies notebook makes specific reference to Oareford, Mill Hill, and Weir Water. He must have walked here to find deer. Then he encounters Badgworthy Water which forms the county boundary. It gathers up the small streams trickling down the combes, then flows down to join Oare Water at Malmsmead where the two streams join to form the East Lynn river and continue through Brendon to Lynmouth. Jefferies was not seeking out beauty spots here but deer, but Weir Water, Badgworthy Water and Oareford are just about as beautiful now as they could possibly be (see Chapter II of *Red Deer*). In Chapter III Jefferies is on Cloutsham Ball and is gazing on the wild expanses of Dunkery Beacon. Then he goes on to Horner, Horner Wood, Cloutsham village, and finally Sweetry (actually Sweetworthy just as Badgworthy is pronounced Badgery). It is the descriptions of the deer country that Jefferies' book excels. He did not, in fact, see any deer hunting as no deer, stag or hind, is hunted in June, but the special appeal of the country itself he has caught most faithfully.

We now reach the third part of the tour covering perhaps 7 June to 12 June—6 days all told, and this time he is in Exford, and the country nearby. We have to guess the dates but we know for certain that he was here because he corresponded with one of his hosts. It is likely that on seeing the Quantocks, and talked with the local people, that he discovered how important the deer

were. He could see scope for something bigger than an article and decided to write a book and needed guidance. This guidance came from Arthur Heal and his son Fred Heal. Jefferies wrote to Fred on 5 August, after he got back, sending him a book and referring to Arthur and also to Sovereign—one of the best hounds. Jefferies went to Arthur Heal for information because Arthur, from 1871 to 1889 was the Huntsman of the Devon and Somerset staghounds, that is he was a paid servant of the Hunt and had to deal with the hounds, the helpers in the form of harbourers and tufters, and had to lead the way when the Hunt was out. By 1883 he was a legend, never known as Arthur Heal but always, and to everyone, high and low, as Arthur. The kennels were at Exford, then as now a welcoming place on the river Exe, with two hotels. Heal lived at and farmed North Ley Farm just a little farther out of Exford than the kennels, which were near the bridge. [North has drawn Exford from the bridge and much the same view can be seen today except that the church is hidden by trees and there is a garage on the right.] Arthur's son Fred lived with his parents but had his own farm.

Victor Bonham-Carter feels sure that Jefferies actually stayed with the Heals. They were certainly hospitable but it is also just possible that Jefferies stayed at the White Horse. We do not know where but somewhere or other he sat at table and talked to farmers. Although he wrote in his notebook the name of the great rescuer of Exmoor—Sir Frederic Knight MP of Simonsbath—there is no evidence that he met him, nor indeed that he went as far as Simonsbath, but someone must have brought Jefferies and the Heals together. I do not think Jefferies could just have turned up at their door and said 'Tell me all about deer hunting.' Arthur was much too important to be treated like that. A name that appears twice in Jefferies' notebook for this time is that of Mordant Fenwick Bisset M.P. He lived at West Bagborough which is near Wills Neck and is about 5 miles from Bicknoller. Fenwick Bisset, like Arthur Heal, was a legend in his day and for many a day thereafter. He had started up the pack of staghounds years before, and as Master of the Devon and Somerset Stagounds from 1855 to 1881 had, virtually single-handed, raised the Hunt from nothing to something so celebrated that in 1879 the Prince of Wales had come down and hunted with them. I do not see how Jefferies, unknown and from afar, not even a hunting man, can have got so close to the Heals except by the intervention of someone like Fenwick Bisset.

By the time Jefferies got to the Heals at Exford, perhaps a book about deer was on his mind. In his letter to Jefferies, thanking him for the copy of *Red Deer* (16 Jan 1884), Fred Heal said: 'had I known your intentions of doing anything of that sort when you was at Exford I should have taken more pains'. However,

Jefferies didn't go to Exmoor in order to write such a book. Had he meant to do that he would have chosen a different time when deer were being hunted.

Judging by his letter to Fred Heal of August 1883, the two of them did some trout fishing. If we add this knowledge to the lengthy and evocative account of the river Barle in the essays, we may conclude that most of the fishing was done in the Barle, though it is the Exe that flows through Exford. The Barle flows near Simonsbath and is seen again in quieter mood at Withypool. Jefferies describes it as it runs past Tarr Steps, as Sir Antony Clare Lees so beautifully shows in his photograph in *The Wessex Landscape of Richard Jefferies*. Perhaps the two young men went to fish at Withypool—it is only a few miles from Exford—and then went on a little way to see the famous stepping stones. Jefferies also mentions Dulverton, and as this is in the same area, and marks the point where the Exe and the Barle join, Heal may have taken Jefferies here too. There is no way of knowing, but it is good to think of Jefferies enjoying his tea with blueberry jam and cream.

After this, his head teeming with information about the deer and his inner eye replete with sights of great beauty, his heart warmed by the kind ways of the people, Jefferies turned back towards Bicknoller, and his host Mr North. At least in 'Summer in Somerset' he says 'From the Devon border I drifted like a leaf detached from a tree across to a deep combe in the Quantock Hills.' This may be poetic licence, perhaps he went straight home from Dulverton, but it really makes no difference. We can look at the map of north Somerset (for he really only went to the Quantocks and Exmoor) and see the ground he covered, from east to west is only 20 miles, and from north to south only a little more than 10. Home he goes to write the long article for the *EIM*, the two short articles for the *MG*, and an extra one for the *Standard*. But what he most wants to do is to write his book about the deer he loved so much.

The three shorter articles appeared almost immediately, and the book was written by 15 July and published in January 1884. The only mystery is what happened to 'Summer in Somerset'. It was not published until just after Jefferies' death and it has long been assumed that Jefferies did not write it until quite late. But this is not the case. It was written by September 1833 and was in Comyns Carr's hands. Why did it not appear? My first guess is that Jefferies was paid for it. My second guess is that it was not quite good enough for Macmillans. It was not the plain topographical description they wanted; it dealt only with part of Somerset; and some of it is frankly padding. My other guess is that the illustrations were not all ready and some of them, when they were ready—not good enough. I hope this does not sound cruel. In the 1860s North had, done black and white illustrations of great beauty. He was not good at drawing people but he was wonderful at outdoor compositions. I expect

Comyns Carr wanted six or eight of these for his magazine. But they take a long time to do and though Macmillans were paying well for this work, North probably did not want it any more. If we look at his work at this time we see that he was exhibiting water colours at the Old Water Colour Society. He was also exhibiting at the Grosvenor Gallery and the Royal Academy (oils or water colours) and these almost certainly paid better than illustrations.[see 'Sir Bevis and the Wood Woman, 1888) If we add the fact that North was about to get married—at the ripe old age of 42—we can see why he may have been half-hearted about the illustrations for this article. Compared with his best work this is sketchy. The Stogumber Mill and Holford Glen pictures are pleasant but the rest really add little to the text. My own view is that Comyns Carr was disappointed. By 1887 he perhaps felt he should publish.

A little more about the three friends: Comyns Carr published two of his essays in the *EIM*—'St Guido' and 'Walks in the Wheatfields' and he twice tried to persuade Macmillans to take books by Jefferies—once in October 1884 with *After London*, and later in October 1886 with *Amaryllis*. The Editor of the *MG*,

C.P. Scott published several articles by Jefferies after the Somerset ones but he did much more. Much, but not all, of the correspondence between Scott and Jefferies still exists and more of it is referred to by Walter Besant; this shows that Scott went out of his way, at times when he was very much occupied with his own affairs, to help Jefferies with sympathy, encouragement, advice, visits, a seaside holiday, and finally with straight gifts of cash disguised as loans. It is difficult to add to Scott's great reputation but the story of his dealings with Jefferies certainly does add to it.

North, too, went on holding out the hand of friendship and though we have only one letter from him to Jefferies there is other evidence that North visited in person at times when it can have been no pleasure to him at all. He paid one visit to Goring which he describes, in his next visit he is too late, and Richard Jefferies is dead. At this point he discovers just how poorly placed Jessie and the two children are and he sets about raising money for a fund which will support them, his words—so eloquent that no one tried to improve on them—were published and a great deal of money was raised

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