

144 Wealth, Work and Wiltshire

Phyllis Treitel

Text of a talk given to the Swindon U3A on 12 April 1999 at the Ellendune Hall, Wroughton by Phyllis Treitel. Not all of the quotations are recorded.

Introduction

It is a great honour for me to be asked to talk to you. I had hoped that your fellow-member, Olive Roe, who proposed me, would be here today to hear me, but to my great sorrow, she died last August. I liked her very much and we all miss her.

This place, Wroughton, has great significance for me: although I have driven through it more times than I can count, I have never before stopped here. For me, it has always been a gateway—to Avebury, and to Barbury Castle. As you can guess, I am devoted to the Ridgeway, and go up there as often as I can, to walk and enjoy the fresh air and the long views.

Your organiser invited me to speak about Richard Jefferies, but when he first asked, I had no idea what I would say, and so we decided to call the talk 'Some aspects of Richard Jefferies'. What I had in mind was the contradictions and inconsistencies in Jefferies. To some people, these are confusing; to others they make the man fascinating, and they keep us members of the Richard Jefferies Society happily beaver-ing away.

So what I have done is to choose 3 or 4 aspects of Jefferies' life and work, and to pass on to you any new facts or new ideas that shed light upon them. I shall not waste your time on Jefferies' life history—you were probably taught that at school—I shall just start straight in, taking it for granted that you know the basic facts. The 'aspects' that I have chosen to examine are Jefferies' attitudes to WEALTH, WORK, AND WILTSHIRE. I could just as easily have chosen Hunting, or women, or progress—he was equally ambivalent about these—Perhaps another Time!

I have no slides. To give you something to look at while I talk, something which is relevant to my themes, I have chosen a painting by Clausen. You will get the connection quite soon.



WEALTH

If you read about Jefferies in newspaper articles, or in rather shallow descriptive pieces, you will almost certainly be told of his acute poverty. Yet here I am, starting out to tell you about wealth. Not that he was ever wealthy but he very much wanted to be rich. I shall come later to his undeserved reputation for being an idler, but just now want to deal with his ambition, and his attitude to money.

Some of what we hear about Richard as a schoolboy does not make us love him. His female cousins found him overbearing. At the age of 16 he ran away with his cousin James Cox. He did no work on his father's farm, getting a reputation as a poacher. This was not very promising, but promising or not, he got a job as a reporter on a local Swindon newspaper, the *North Wilts Herald*, and soon learned how to write.

As a child he had enjoyed telling stories; soon he was publishing stories in local papers. You can read some of them in Grace Toplis's book *The Early Fiction of Richard Jefferies*. From these, and from a story such as 'The Rise of Maximin' which he wrote later, you can see where his ambition lay: his heroes were 'explorers, fighters, always leaders.

Jefferies wanted to be a successful writer who made money. He knew that a best-selling novel could make the author rich and that was what he wanted. This is not surprising as his father's precarious position in the farming world—which after 1868 when Jefferies was 20 became indebtedness—impressed itself on him as a boy. His mother never had any money to spend, his father had to borrow to keep going. So he began to set about launching himself as a novelist and we can read his letter to the publisher Tinsley in 1872. He is trying to get Tinsley to take a novel which he had called 'Only a Girl' and he says:

The scenery is a description of that found in this county with every portion of which I have been familiar for many years. The characters are drawn from life, so far disguised as to render too easy identification impossible. I have worked in many of the traditions of Wilts, endeavouring, in fact, in a humble manner, to do for that county what Melville has done for Northampton and Miss Braddon for Yorkshire.

It was no good. Tinsley did not take it. Just over a year later he wrote to the same publisher:

I mean to become a name, sooner or later. I shall stick to the first publisher who takes me up; and, unless I am very much mistaken, we shall make money. To write a tale is to me as easy as to write a letter, and I do not see why I should not issue two a year for the next twelve or fifteen years. I can hardly see the possible loss from a novel.

Between the writing of these two letters, one in 1872 and the other in 1874, he had published his first book. It was not a novel and it did not make money but it did not actually lose any. It was *A Memoir of the Goddards* and Horatio Nelson Goddard of Swindon put up £2.10 towards the initial expenses.

Jefferies still wanted to publish one of his novels but he had not succeeded. Possibly the £2.10 from Goddard gave him the idea of getting his novel published by putting up some of the money, and getting that money by writing to **people** like Goddard. A copy of just such a letter has recently come to light. It has never, so far as I know, been published, or even mentioned. I have never seen the original, though I should like to, and I hope to track it down eventually.

One always learns something extra from seeing an original, as those of you who do research will know. It is addressed to J. Copleston Townsend Esq. The same Townsend whose descendants still have a firm of solicitors in Old Town. Jefferies dates it November the 24th and does not give the year, but because the address he gives is 22 Victoria St. we know that it must be 1875. He moved there with Jessie, his bride, in 1875 and their first baby was born there.

Letter to Copleston Townsend

22 Victoria St,

Nov 24th

Dear Sir

I should like you to read the enclosed letter which I have just received from the Editor of the New Quarterly Magazine (who being wealthy is passing the autumn in Portugal). It refers to an article of mine published in October for which I received £35. Some couple of months ago I applied to you for some money to enable me to bring out a work, and I wish you to read the enclosed in order that you may see I was not altogether too confident when I said that with a very little assistance I should be able to achieve solid success. May I please ask you not to mention the contents of the enclosed to anyone, for having always been treated with contempt by the Swindon people I particularly wish to keep my affairs private - kindly return the letter,

Faithfully Yours,

Richard Jefferies.

J. Copleston Townsend, Esq.

The article in October had first place in the Magazine. The Mark Lane Express published a special supplement reprinting nearly the whole of it.

Richard Jefferies

24 Nov 1875

I have read the whole letter out to you because it is, I think, so revealing of much that we know about Jefferies as well as telling us things we did not know. He mentions 'a work'. What work? We think it must be the book 'In Summer Time' which was never published under that name but appeared eventually with a different title as either *Greene Ferne Farm* or, *The Dewy Morn*. The article is definitely 'Village Organisation'

—a competent, practical piece of journalism, but until this letter showed up we had no idea that he had been paid as much as £35 for it. You can get an idea of how generous this was when you know that Jefferies was paid just £40 by Chatto and Windus in 1885 for a whole book. We also learn from the letter that this is not the first time he has approached Townsend for money. We do not know why he chose Townsend. We assume that Townsend put up no money at either time. Finally we learn from the last sentence, that Jefferies liked to put his correspondents in the position of being the recipients of secrets, and his view, which may or may not have been sincere, or even justified, that Swindon people treated him with contempt. It is the sort of letter that might well have been thrown in the paper basket but I am glad that it was kept, perhaps because Swindon people were not quite as contemptuous as they appeared.

In fact, just over a year after sending off this letter, Jefferies and his little family were ensconced in a house in Tolworth, near Surbiton, and he had a well-paid commission for a weekly article on agricultural matters that kept them nicely. The Editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, Frederick Greenwood, encouraged him to write about poaching and gamekeeping; George Smith of the firm Smith Elder, who published the Brontes' books, and who owned the *PMG*, then made books of these articles and Jefferies' name was made. Yet he had done it entirely on his merits and did not need to go begging for what we would now call sponsorship from local grandees.

The Jefferies lived quite well; they were certainly not poor.

Another letter that has surfaced recently—alas the first page is missing so we do not have the date—is one from Jefferies to his father. Jefferies and wife and child are on holiday by the sea, for about a month, and this is what he writes:

Letter of ?1878 to his father

These are not the sentiments of a man who is desperately poor.

Yet Jefferies' eventual poverty was real, and in a sense typically Victorian, in that numerous people were well-off one day and broke the next. The usual reason for coming down in the world was that business undertakings had crashed. The reason for Jefferies' ultimate poverty was his health. He was, as we all know, tubercular, but it affected more than his lungs. In 1881-2 he had to pay for three serious operations, so that money was going out and none coming in; from late 1883 onwards he was never well and soon very ill indeed. From 1885 onwards he was visibly poor and needing to apply to friends and charity for enough to live on. But had he not fallen ill there is little doubt that he would have continued to make enough for a comfortable standard of living. He invested his spare cash prudently, while he had it. Once his health went he was helpless.

It is, in a sense then, a paradox that Richard Jefferies, who so very much wanted to be rich, should end up too poor to pay his bills. It meant that he developed a hatred towards the really rich because he thought they did not understand their obligations to the poor. In fact, they were the people who bought his books, spoke up for him when asked to, and contributed when a fund was raised to support his family, after his death.

This experience, and the earlier experience of seeing his father and mother pressed for money gave him acute insights into the lives of the working poor, especially rural poor. From Jefferies' attitude to money and success, as I have very briefly sketched it

here, I can move on to focus on work, that is, hard manual work, as it affected the poor. This will lead us to Jefferies so-called idleness. I hope you will see how these aspects of the man all cohere and light up each other.

WORK

In his famous book, written in 1883, *The Story of My Heart*, Jefferies wrote: [Chapter II, page 74]

I hope succeeding generations will be able to be idle—I hope that nine-tenths of their time will be leisure time . . .

[Like us, me talking, you listening]

He had been an agricultural journalist in Swindon and in Cirencester and he had seen, on the farm where he lived, what it was like to earn your bread by the sweat of your brow. One of his favourite topics, therefore, was the de-glamorisation of farm work. He had tried it, and found it beyond him; of course he was not built for it, nor trained to it, but he was able because of his experience, to describe it, quite sincerely, in terms that make it sound like a form of torture.

This was, of course, an exaggeration, and to my mind, the less successful for that, but it had much truth in it. For example in 'One of the New Voters' [MG Jan 1885 *The Open Air*] he describes the harvest work of Roger the reaper:

He had been in the harvest field 14 hours, exposed to the intense heat, not even shielded by a pith helmet; he had worked the day through with thew and sinew; he had had for food a little dry bread and a few onions, for drink a little weak tea and a great deal of small beer.

In a later essay—'Walks in the Wheatfields' [*Field and Hedgerow*] he becomes even more impassioned, and we can see why he wanted 'succeeding generations to be idle'.

Quote from Walks in the Wheatfields.

And yet, in another essay, he takes a different line. This is called 'Golden Brown' and is the description of two women, on their way home from a long day's work.

[PMG 27 August 1884, *Open Air*, pages 29-30]

Since these are women that he has just observed, not people he has tried to imagine, his reactions to them seem to me much more sincere, and the women much more faithful to life than what he writes about reapers.

We see here that he is in another sort of bind. We first saw how he wanted to be well-off but resented the rich. Now we see that he himself worked very hard and admired other successful men, and yet he could not bear to see people at work who were performing tasks that he could not do. And not getting much money for it. Such people did not read his books; if they had they would probably have resented the way they had been portrayed.

One reason for this bias he had may have been, again, the example of his father, who seemed to Jefferies to be always working and yet never getting his proper reward as Samuel Smiles preached. And this is where Jefferies' championing of

the labouring poor may have done some good, however partial, because it helped to undermine the philosophy of his time which was that work was sacred, and that anyone could succeed if he only worked hard enough. Jefferies emphatically denied that this was so.

IDLENESS

And so we come easily to another paradox of Jefferies—his so-called idleness—the opposite of work. Of course Jefferies worked; the long list of his books and the much longer list of his articles and essays proves it, yet around Swindon he had the reputation of an idler.

It is easy to see how this happened. He was the eldest of 4 children; his grandfather Jefferies was prosperous; his father owned (in a sense) a small farm and therefore should have been prosperous. Richard had passed the years from age 4 to age 9 (or thereabouts) with his aunt and uncle in London where there was a big house with servants, a carriage, and plenty of everything. When he came back to Coate to go to school he could hardly be expected to work alongside the farm hands. He might now, but not in those days. So he wandered about with a gun, in his spare time, shooting birds and wild animals and fishing, as if he were gentry. There is plenty of indirect evidence to suggest that he felt himself part of the gentry.

Alas, back at the farm, there was no money to spend; hard words passed between his father, whom he idolised, and his mother. To keep things going, money was borrowed on the security of the farm when grandfather's will turned out to be so harsh on James Luckett Jefferies. Richard was, by now, working as a reporter, but he could no longer see his way clear. The house was full of problems and he sought relief in the fields and on the hills.

It is this which has earned him a reputation as an idler, and it is this that I want to examine. What was he doing? Or not doing?

Perhaps, like me, you have read *The Story of My Heart* and not quite known what, to make of it. The passages in the first chapter, though partly descriptive and about communing with nature, are not Jefferies in the role of observer, though that is never far away. Some commentators answer the question by saying that Jefferies was a mystic. He may have been. I do not know, but I am very wary of the word mystical; nowadays it is usually used to mean either 'magical' or 'mysterious'. The OED definition of mystic is:

One who seeks by contemplation and self-surrender to obtain union with or absorption into the Deity, or who believes in spiritual apprehension of truths beyond the understanding.

But Jefferies' expeditions to the hills began very young, in his teens, hence the accusation of idleness by neighbours, and something must have preceded any mysticism, if there ever was any.

If we read his own words—and they are not very long—it sounds more as if he was trying to satisfy the religious side of himself, trying to open himself up to other, better influences than the ones at home or at work. No one seems to have taught him what to do. Let us see what he says:

p.7 There was a hill to which I used to resort at such periods. The labour of walking 3 miles to it, all the while gradually ascending, seemed to clear my blood . . . By the time I had reached the summit

I had entirely forgotten the petty circumstances and the annoyance of existence. I felt myself myself.

p.8 Woods hid the scattered hamlets and farmhouses, so that I was quite alone. I was utterly alone with the sun and the earth.

p.8 Lying down on the grass, I spoke in my soul to the earth, the sun, the air, and the distant sea far beyond sight. *I* thought of the wandering air ... I spoke to the sea, though so far, in my mind I saw it, green at the rim of the earth and blue in deeper ocean. Next, to myself I came and recalled myself, my bodily existence .

p.9 I thought of my inner existence, that consciousness which is called the soul . . . I hid my face in the grass rapt and carried away .

p.9 Finally I rose, walked half a mile or so along the summit of the hill, eastwards to soothe myself and come to the common ways again . . . I was greatly exhausted when I reached home.

p.10 [Sometimes, after staring up at the sky, he faced the grass and ‘remembered the old, old sea’] . . . Travelling in an instant across the distant sea, I saw as if with actual vision the palms and coconut trees, the bamboos of India, and the cedars of the extreme south. Like a lake with islands, the ocean lay before me, as clear and vivid as the plain beneath in the amphitheatre of the hills.

p. 10 In winter, though I could not then rest on the grass, or stay long enough to form any definite expression, I still went up the hill once now and then, for it seemed to me that to merely visit the spot repeated all that I had previously said.

p.11 In summer I went out into the fields and let my soul inspire these thoughts under the trees . . . If trees could speak, hundreds of them would say that *I* had these soul-emotions under them.

p.15 Often in the streets of London, as the red sunset flames on the houses, the old thought, the old prayer came. [see p.37 re London Bridge]

p.16 The same prayer comes to me at this very hour. It is now less solely associated with the sun and sea, hills, woods, or beauteous human shape. It is always within. It requires no waking; no renewal; it is always with me.

Edward Thomas, by the way, in his superb book on Jefferies, identified, as far as he could, these thinking places that Jefferies lists, [p.84 Chap VI]

I said that no one taught Jefferies to practice this, although of course he was a churchgoer and knew about private prayer. But we are now taught to do it, or something very like it. This thought occurred to me as I listened to a cassette tape about Relaxation and Meditation. The voice said:

. . . relaxation, with regular practice, produces a state of deep physical rest and calmness, coupled with a wakeful and highly alert mental state very different from that experienced during sleep or hypnosis.

There is a lower rate of metabolism, the heart beats slower, and the pattern of brainwaves is changed, all suggesting a deep state of calmness that would take many hours of complete rest or deep sleep, rather than just 20 minutes of meditation.

A certain amount of this calmness also stays with us during our daily activities, helping to protect us from the dangers of stress and tension. This calmness is achieved by focussing the attention on a chosen object of meditation which helps to reduce the amount of signals our body and mind receive at any one time, saving nervous and mental energy.

As we learn to focus our attention through meditation we tap a deeper intuitive aspect of our minds, which can help us to think more creatively and efficiently.

It seems to me that whatever else Jefferies was doing in his 'thinking places', especially when he was on Liddington Hill, he was relaxing, meditating, and, what is called in the jargon, visualising. Many of you may have been taught this in classes, or from books. One is taught to train oneself, in moments of quiet, to focus on a pleasant scene or object, shut out our worries, and achieve calmness. Having learned to do it, and it takes practice, one can summon up the thought or image and achieve calm at times of stress. Jefferies seems to have been able to do this around Coate, at Tolworth (near Surbiton), and even in busy parts of London, such as London Bridge.

It was not idleness. So what was it? It seems to me that it was an outlet for Jefferies' strong spiritual feelings and curiosity, helping him to enlarge his spiritual life, and leading to greater sympathy for sufferers. It enabled him to tap in to extra sources of energy and powers of concentration. This power is evident in some of his best essays which he wrote when he was dying—and knew that he was dying (I will read two short such passages in a moment). It may have made possible what is otherwise inexplicable, his ability to do some of his best work when starving from his disease, racked with pain and sleeplessness, and consumed with anxiety over providing for his family. This power was the harvest of Jefferies' 'idleness' and this may be why he was so anxious for us to be idle and to have time to spend in the open air. Two quotations:

'Hours of Spring' *Field and Hedgerow*, March/April 1886, Longmans.

What will they do without me . . .

Bitter to know this . . .

WILTSHIRE

I have tried to look at three or four aspects of Richard Jefferies—his ambition and complex attitude to money; his compassion for those forced to do hard manual work; his apparent idleness during times of solitude which led to so many books; finally, his gift to Wiltshire, about which he cared so much even if, as he thought, Wiltshire did not care for him.

If you remember, I quoted, at the beginning, part of a letter of the young Jefferies in which he wrote that he was endeavouring, in a novel, to do for Wiltshire what Whyte Melville had done for Northampton and Miss Braddon for Yorkshire. I am not sure that Northampton and Yorkshire are famed because of those writers but I am sure that his part of Wiltshire is famous because of Jefferies. It did not happen quite as he had planned because it was not achieved through his novels.

In that letter to Townsend that I read to you, he mentions the editor who has just paid him £35 for a single article. That man was Oswald Crawford. Although they never met, he was sufficiently friendly to Jefferies to get him to confide that he had pages and pages of notes about Coate Water and the country round about. As I said earlier, and as everyone here knows, Jefferies' articles in the *Pall Mall Gazette* were quickly recognised as something quite special, and were readily turned into the books we all know: *The Gamekeeper at Home*, *Wild Life in a Southern County*, (that is Wiltshire) *The Amateur Poacher*, *Hodge and His Masters* (not the PMG but the *Standard*), dealing mainly with people, and *Round About a Great Estate* (Coate and Burderop). It was

partly the confidence that the publication of these books gave him that led to the later, finer essays such as 'Pageant of Summer'.

I feel quite sure that when Jefferies lay face down on the turf of Liddington Hill he was not doing it in order to get on and grow rich. Nor, I think, did his constant observation of wild life and his time spent at his 'thinking places' form part of his plan to get on. He did have plans to get on, we know this from his notebooks, but he misjudged how to do it. Those hours of observation and meditation (because that is what much of it was) all began in Wiltshire, while he was very young, very eager, and very sensitive. It was done almost as a respite from his attempts to get on. Wiltshire became part of his consciousness.

But he actually wrote the essays and books elsewhere. He was living near Surbiton when he wrote the books I listed a few minutes ago. He probably did have some notes, but most of what he wrote was from memory.

There are three reasons why the descriptive matter in those books was so attractive then and is still so appealing today:

- He uses fresh words and phrases, no clichés;
- It is obviously first-hand, seen and felt by him, not out of books;
- Thirdly, it is lifted up and braced by his own strong feeling.

His time 'doing nothing', 'idling' bore this unique fruit. So important was it to Jefferies to write about Wiltshire that he brought Wiltshire into places where it did not belong.

1. His chapter about 'Hodge' in *Hodge and His Masters* has 14 pages of description of the fields, and one paragraph about the man at his work.

2. His novels, for example *Greene Ferne Farm* and *The Dewy Morn*, have long passages of description. Reviewers usually complained if there was too much of this. In Jefferies' case they complained that the only time the story came to life was when he was describing the scene

3. And in his book *Nature Near London*, he actually slips in bits that we know are places in Wiltshire. He just can't keep it out.

In a way that he never imagined, Jefferies put North Wilts on the map, to the extent that there is now an area known as Jefferies' Land. Readers of his books come here from as far away as Japan just to see it and much of it still remains and we hope to keep it for a long time to come. In 1910 an American woman artist and writer, Kate Tryon, came to Coate and spent months painting the scenes and talking to the local people with whom she took lodgings. She loved it, and came again and again. Her book (which she never managed to get published) called 'Adventures in the Vale of the White Horse' is fascinating now (there is quite a bit about Wroughton) and is in the Swindon library for people to read. Some of her paintings have been given to the Borough.

Just recently an Australian visited Coate Water. He had been disinterring dead bodies in Bosnia, uncovering war crimes. To take his mind off this horrible job he had been reading Jefferies. On a visit to England, he was driving along the M4 when he saw a sign saying 'Swindon'. He turned off and, to his delight, saw a sign saying Coate Water. And there it was. The descriptions in *The Story of My Heart*, *Amaryllis at the Fair*, and *Round About a Great Estate* are so compelling that readers of them want to come and see for themselves.

I hope you can see that there is some link between the aspects of Jefferies that I have chosen: His ambition for fame and money; his antipathy to mere drudgery and his sympathy for those condemned to it; his private discovery of the mental replenishment to be got from contemplation of nature, inner quiet, and visualisation of beauty. These characteristics enabled him, by his writing, to reach and touch thousands of readers.

But this is not quite all. He also helped to change our attitude to landscape and to clean air.

Roughly at the time Jefferies was writing, various movements were beginning which aimed at improving the lot of people living in towns, and saving the best of the countryside. There was the Open Spaces Society and later the National Trust. William Morris (of Kelmscott) was one of its leaders. Jefferies himself, part of no movement, had urged garden owners to have more patches of wilderness, and to encourage birds to nest. He sang the praises of the fresh air, especially that on the hills, and its benefit to children. [quote from last page of *Amateur Poacher*]

Even when he was not exhorting, the mere fact of writing about rural matters, and thus teaching them, meant that, he awoke people's curiosity and their longing for their rural past. He did not do this intentionally; in fact he disliked people playing at farming, but it all contributed to the move for Clean Air, better housing, with trees and gardens and parks, for conservation of the landscape.

I was surprised, recently, to be sent a copy of a thesis, by a German, on the subject of the rise of the Garden City Movement in Germany. What surprised me was the fact that the Germans got the idea from the English and one the names frequently mentioned as an inspiration to them, was Jefferies.

Jefferies' book *The Story of My Heart* was translated into German and published in Germany in 1906. It is sad to think that Jefferies, who died in 1887, did not live to see this but luckily he knew it was on the cards. We have a letter to his mother, not dated, but probably written in 1886 in which he tells her that he has had a letter from Germany asking about a translation. I am sure that this pleased him. The book must have had an impact on the people planning Germany's answer to the problem of intolerable town conditions.

So, not only did Jefferies' books and essays influence people here in England, it even spread to the Continent. Of course we do not see him like that; we don't like to think that he helped us to change our ways. But we have to come to terms with the fact that this man, who wrote in his letter to the solicitor Townsend that he had 'always been treated with contempt by the Swindon people', has had a profound effect on our attitudes towards the land and its creatures. How did he manage it?

His outlook was his own. His words were his own. His observations were his own. The time he spent, face down on Liddington Hill, was his own and he paid dearly for it. The fact that his feelings and the expression of them were unique to him explains why he is still read with pleasure today. With the threat of Genetically modified crops he has recently become even more relevant. I have noticed that writers now bring his name into discussions about conservation, just to give tone and respectability. If Jefferies said it, it must be so. Even the writer V S Naipaul, who praised nobody, said that Jefferies' 'brambly' writing was good. It was not the brambliness, it was the genuineness.

I have ended here in Wiltshire, to bring my wobbly boat in to the jetty, and let you all step ashore. This is your Wiltshire. But it might have been anywhere. Wiltshire is a very beautiful county but had Jefferies been brought up in Dorset or East Anglia, I think it would have been the same. He would have extolled its beauty to us and we would have rushed to see it for ourselves.