

# Would Richard Jefferies have made a more successful art critic than an expert on rural life?

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Well, of course the answer is 'No' but the fact that it can be asked at all is worth examining, and I will approach it from four angles:

1. Were there any formal hindrances to Jefferies' becoming an art critic? The answer will be 'No'.
2. Did he show any signs of wanting to be an art critic? The answer will be 'Yes, some.'
3. Did he in fact write any art criticism? Yes.
4. Could he have made a living as an art critic? 'No'.

## 1. How did someone become an art critic in 19th century England?

Unlike in France or Germany, no special qualifications were required to be an art critic in England. You did not need to have an art training, or a degree in aesthetics. All kinds of people became art critics and I will mention the careers of just three by way of examples.

### Oscar Wilde(1854–1900)

I start with Oscar Wilde because he is such an unlikely example and everyone will have heard of him. He was only 23 when in 1877 he went to the opening of the Grosvenor Gallery and then reviewed it for the *Dublin University Magazine*. In 1879 he reviewed the Grosvenor Gallery again, this time for *Saunders Irish Daily News*. Yet he had had no training, either as a journalist or as an art critic. He went on to become the spokesman for the Aesthetic Movement.

### Henry James (1843–1916)

Henry James is best known as a novelist but, in his early years as a writer, he was a serious art critic. Many of his articles on art are published in a book titled *The Artist's Eye*. He began, aged 25, in 1868, with a review of a book about French painting; in 1873 he reviewed 'The Wallace Collection'; and in 1877 he published an article titled 'The Picture Season in London'. Most of his articles were published in America, yet they were so good that, it is claimed, John Ruskin wished Henry James to succeed him as Slade Professor at Oxford. Yet

James, though he had lived in France and Italy and spent much time in museums (he had rich parents), had had no training in art criticism.

Joseph Comyns Carr (1849-1916)

Comyns Carr is the third example of someone who was a contemporary of Jefferies, who had no art training, but who became an art critic. He differs from the previous two men in that he became a leading figure in the English art world and, important for us, he was a good friend to Jefferies. As a young man he had read for the Bar. Like many other young men waiting for briefs, he turned his hand to journalism and soon specialised in writing about art. He became the top art critic for C.P. Scott's *Manchester Guardian*, a Director of the Grosvenor Gallery, and co-founder in 1888 of The New Gallery. More important for Jefferies, in 1883 Macmillans invited him to be the editor of their new magazine—*The English Illustrated Magazine*. For this publication he commissioned Jefferies to write an article about Somerset, and sent him there to meet J.W. North, whom he had asked to do the illustrations.

Like Henry James, Carr was a conservative in art matters, but he did a great deal towards bringing art to those who had no access to London.

I have selected these three men, who were very much of an age with Jefferies, to show that they had no art qualifications: it was then (and is now) an open profession. In theory Jefferies could have done the same.

## 2. Did Jefferies show any signs of wanting to be an art critic?

The year 1876 was pivotal for Jefferies. He had no job. He had a wife and baby to support. He had not discovered a way of making a good living. As far as we know he spent much of 1876 in London, leaving Jessie in Swindon with the baby. We only know this from the 1876 notebook which is mainly in shorthand. We know that he published an article in *World* in 1876 which was to do with exhibitions: 'Sipping the Season' on 7 June. In it he tells us that he was attending the Royal Academy Exhibition (which was being held where it is now, in Burlington House) but taking more notice of the young women than of the paintings.

His notebook entry says (and I take this from the transcription provided by John Pearson in his thesis) (504): 'Sipping the Season? Royal Academy levee, the first thing is to get rid of the idea of time—not to have to go to the Academy at any particular hour.' A little later (505) he writes 'Dress and manners—Royal Academy in the carriage—how unnatural the pictures are. These are far more interesting. There are no pictures one would care to live with—you cannot imagine yourself walking to the Royal Academy with any of these pictured ladies accompanying you.'

In May 1878 (we do not have the notebook for 1877) Jefferies is again at the Royal Academy and comments, on 8 May, on the weakness of the hunting

pictures: 'Hounds no individuality. Horses in action legs wrongly foreshortened.' And he makes a note to see the *Times* article on the Academy show on 11 May. On 12 June 1878 his article 'The Nude in London' appears in *World*. In it, he is not content to complain about the 'lanky long-drawn narrowness of form to the draped figures of recent compositions', but also assesses what might be called the poor-man's academy, namely the print shops with their depictions of half-dressed females, or with illustrations from French newspapers, and shops with carte de visite photographs of scantily dressed ballet girls. These appeal to the common man. He is, in this article, begging, in fact, for better nudes. Alas, women in northern climes seldom sit around with nothing on so it is difficult to introduce realism into such art. Jefferies would be just as ready to criticise today's editor of *The Sun*. But it is clear from the article that he spent time looking at art of all kinds, and thinking about its relevance.

It is no surprise that Jefferies took a journalistic interest in art by which we mean mainly painting as it was a hot topic for the whole of his short life. John Ruskin had established himself as the leading art critic, and we know that Jefferies read his work. The Pre-Raphaelites with their attention to detail and vivid colours had become much sought-after. The Aesthetic Movement coincided with Jefferies' writing career and must have influenced him, even if he was unaware of it. Its members took as their motifs the sunflower and the lily, and Oscar Wilde almost parodied it, but in essence it chimed with Jefferies' own concerns: 'It embraced not only High Art but also decorative arts and popular culture ... it was not about a single style of painting or design but about attitudes, individual aesthetic tastes, and lifestyles.' Walter Pater had decreed that life should be experienced to the full without too many religious or moral implications, or restraints, that beauty itself is a religion, and that 'to burn always with this hard gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy is success in life.' This might have been written specifically for Jefferies though we have no evidence of his having ever even heard of Pater.

Again, although Jefferies never gives any hint of having heard of William Morris (of Kelmscott, not the William Morris of Swindon whom he knew well) he was probably influenced by him too. Morris's work has lasted so well that it is hard to realise that he was 14 years old when Jefferies was born, and was studying at Oxford when Jefferies was 5. When he was 21, William Morris came into his own money—£900 per year—and was able to give his whole attention to designing and making beautiful furnishings. He also wrote a great deal of poetry for which, in his lifetime, he was better known than for his designs.

At the time I am considering, i.e. 1876 and 1877, Jefferies was reading all the papers, desperately looking for topics to sell to editors. In the 1876 notebook—probably for a date in June—he writes: 'Art. —destruction of cathedrals—visit them and describe the injury to restoration.' And then, either on or for the First of June, he writes: 'Academy—write account of it by end:

skeleton everything local . . .' Now the item about church restoration is interesting because in March 1877 Morris wrote a fierce letter to *The Athenaeum*, protesting about the damage being done by so-called restorers, and setting up the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings. One would imagine therefore that Jefferies had picked up something in the papers before Morris's letter. And he might well have noticed a letter by Morris to the *Daily News* on 26 October 1876, protesting about the conduct of the Turks. It seems to me that in these two years when Jefferies was avid to get his foot on the journalistic ladder he was highly likely to have noticed what Morris was achieving.

### 3. Did Jefferies write art criticism?

Here, the answer is a definite 'yes', and we can examine what he achieved. His writing under this heading can be divided into articles which set out to be art criticism and those which seem to have been less deliberately so. 'The Nude in London' which appeared in 1878 and which was published in the Society's *Journal* in 1894, has already been mentioned. The next example was published in two parts in 1881 and 1882 in *The Magazine of Art*. In *The Life of the Fields* the two parts are put together and titled 'Notes on Landscape Painting' but originally the two parts were respectively 'The Beauty of the Fields' and 'New Facts in Landscape'. Neither of these titles would suggest that the articles were about art but they were published in an art magazine and so one looks for art criticism there. There is hardly any. After a long discussion of what is new in the country—much of which is pleasing to Jefferies—Jefferies devotes his last paragraph to an appeal to painters to paint what is there now, not scenes that are 50 years old. Did he have in mind the sentimental cottage scenes by Helen Allingham (1848-1926) which she admitted she deliberately altered to make them look older? Her watercolours are now highly sought after but in Jefferies' time she was doing engravings for just the papers that Jefferies wrote for such as *Cassell's Magazine* and *London Society*, so he may have known of her. And she married his old friend William Allingham, at one time editor of *Fraser's Magazine*.

His next 'art' essay was 'Field Sports in Art—the Mammoth Hunter' for *Art Journal* in 1885. Again, an odd title, but this time Jefferies has been thinking deeply and seriously about the earliest origins of art: why men feel the urge to draw or paint at all. He has seen a prehistoric tusk with the image of a mammoth engraved on it, and he wonders why early man was moved to make this image. He wonders if drawing preceded speech (an interesting idea); he suggests that primitive people are more impressed with their dreams than modern people, so accustomed to ceaseless literature, and he notes that when the stars were given names, it was the names of animals that were chosen, such

as Great Bear. The essay ends rather tamely, but here in this essay, Jefferies is occupied with the very fundamentals of art.

The last 'art' essay that must be mentioned is 'Nature in the Louvre', published in the same magazine as the two essays which make up 'New Facts in Landscape'. 'Nature in the Louvre' was published in 1887, very shortly before Jefferies' death, but it had been offered to Longman in early 1884 and to C.P. Scott in 1885. Neither of them wanted it, and when he put the MS in a collection for Chatto and Windus—*The Open Air*—they suggested he leave it out, which he did. One can see why editors were shy of it: Jefferies uses the word 'bosom' once, breast nine times, thigh three times, plus blood, loins, pelvis, and bust. It is art criticism in great detail, but, in the latter part of what is a long essay, Jefferies analyses man's need for beauty—more important even than moral goodness. The discoveries set out in *The Story of My Heart* are here too: 'the green leaves repeat the beauty that gladdened man in ancient days. But for them selves they are, and not for us ... we know that for man there is nothing on earth really but man; the human species owns and possesses nothing but its species.'

This is art criticism, but it is not the sort of work that newspaper editors were buying from Henry James and Joseph Comyns Carr. I do not think Jefferies would have been content, for long, to write the kind of article editors did want.

All the same, the question 'could he have been an art critic?' has to be asked because he wrote the essays I have listed, and, to round off this cursory assessment, there are several other references in Jefferies' work which together make it clear that his mind dwelled constantly on the subject of art, even when he was ostensibly writing about something totally different. For instance there is 'Nature and Books' which appeared in the *Fortnightly Review* as late as May 1887, where Jefferies begins with the dandelion and then proceeds in great detail to report the inadequacy of words to define its colour, and suggests a new colour-language to help define dandelion yellow, or different shades of green. Of course, a painter does not need such an aid, but he who uses words, does. Jefferies is not a painter but he sees, and feels as a painter.

If we look in *The Dewy Morn* we find Jefferies reacting to attempts to bring art to the people, and in chapter 47 he ridicules, with his usual generous dose of indignation, a proposed Society for the Encouragement of Art Culture in the Homes of the Poor. 'For the enjoyment of art', he states, 'it is first of all necessary to have a full belly.' And he wonders whether pictures on the wall teach a man anything about art. He is probably thinking of the Kyrle Society, begun in 1880, which aimed to distribute art more widely. He is probably right in thinking that house-life itself can be something like true art, yet it was a widespread practice for poor-people in his day to paper their walls with pictures cut out of magazines and newspapers—they liked pictures.

Again, in 'Sunny Brighton' he lectures the reader about colour: 'As a race we do not seem to care much for colour or art—I mean in the common things of daily life . . . much more colour might be put in the windows, brighter flowers and curtains . . .' Echoes of William Morris here, I feel.

To finish, I go to 'Walks in the Wheatfields' published in the *English Illustrated Magazine* (edited by Comyns Carr) very late—July and August 1887. The original Ms is written in Jessie's handwriting, Jefferies himself writing only the title and signature. Parts of it are bitter, and painful to read, but not all; in this essay, looking back over his life, as he was forced to do, he writes as if he were a painter, and thus qualifies as a critic:

If I were a painter, I should like to paint all this; I should like to paint a great steam-ploughing engine and its vast wheels, with its sweep of smoke, sometimes drifting low over the fallow, sometimes rising into the air in regular shape, like the pine tree of Pliny over Pompeii's volcano.

And, complaining that modern pictures do not show modern machines, he goes on:

Turner painted the railway train and made it at once ideal, poetical, and classical. His 'Rain, Steam, and Speed', which displays a modern subject, is a most wonderful picture. If a man chooses his hour rightly, the steam plough under certain atmospheric conditions would give him as good a subject as a Great Western train. He who has got the sense of beauty in his eye can find it in things as they really are, and needs no stagey time of artificial pastorals to furnish him with a sham nature. Idealise to the full, but idealise the real, else the picture is a sham.

Jefferies both saw as an artist, and as a critic of what artists did. He was dissatisfied with most of the pictures of his day, and yet he could write at length in 'Field Sports in Art' in 1885 about Briton Riviere's 'The Poacher' —a painting that would now be dismissed as sentimental. And art is discussed again in 'Outside London' (1885). He states: 'The lover of nature has the highest art in his soul' and goes on to suggest that the English love of dogs and horses makes up for any lack of salon art. I say this not to draw attention to Jefferies' notorious inconsistencies, but just to show that throughout his life he felt obliged, and equipped, to comment on individual pictures, and the aesthetic life of the nation in general. I think his views of art and aesthetics are interesting, sometimes novel, but his real powers are elsewhere. Art criticism was only a sideline.