

Richard Jefferies 'under happy circumstances': the five years at Surbiton, and their importance to him.

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Richard Jefferies is full of contradictions: this is one of the many reasons why we go on finding him so fascinating. One of the most intriguing contradictions is that he could write so much that was sparkling and cheerful, at a time when he was as unfortunate as he himself, and writers such as Walter Besant have indicated. The sad details of his last years are so well known that their sombre colours have come to stain the whole of his adult life. Yet the writings themselves suggest that there must have been better times. As I looked through Jefferies' notebooks and other papers for the years from early 1877 to early 1882, in other words the five years that he lived at Surbiton, I was compelled to think that if ever Jefferies was happy as an adult it was then. There is a good case for saying that he had a happy childhood, a time that we may fix as ending when he started work at the age of seventeen (March 1866). For the next ten years, in numerous ways, his affairs were unsatisfactory; we know, because he wrote to his Aunt Ellen and told her of all the ups and downs in his fortunes. After he married, the letters to her seem to have ceased, and he made very little comment anywhere else on the years that I want to discuss. In spite of that, an accumulation of evidence exists to justify a claim that his years at 2, Woodside, Surbiton were happy.

He had married in July 1874. For most people marriage introduces a time of delight, but Richard and his wife Jessie spent the first few months of their married life lodging with his family at Coate Farm, and this cannot have been an ideal beginning. The farm was not prospering, indeed agriculture was not prospering, and Jefferies' own earnings were small and uncertain. Jessie became pregnant, and early in 1875 the young couple moved to rented accommodation in Swindon at 22 Victoria Street. I do not think they moved away from the farm as early as October 1874.¹ Jefferies was hoping at this time to make his fortune with a novel, but though he worked diligently at this, he was not successful; the

¹ See Samuel Looker and Crichton Porteous, *Richard Jefferies; Man of the Fields*, 1964, p.101.

book, *Restless Human Hearts*, was published but made no money. He did, however, sell several articles on farming matters in 1875. The baby was born in May of that year and the little family must have been very short of money and forced into a standard of living that was not to their liking. Now, in one of his letters to his Aunt Ellen, Jefferies had hinted that he would like to get work near her so that he could live with her in Sydenham.² This is what he now arranged. How the move came about we do not know but he did spend most of 1876 living, presumably for nothing, with his widowed aunt in Sydenham.³ Jessie had to do the best she could in Swindon. Just what Jefferies himself was doing this whole year has hitherto been something of a mystery. Edward Thomas in his biography of Jefferies stated [p.102] 'A great part of 1876 was spent at Sydenham. . . He must have gone up to find a suitable house near London, yet at the edge of the country, and to make sure of his journalistic connections.' One gets a picture of Jefferies wandering about viewing properties, but this cannot have been so since his letter to Oswald Crawford [see footnote 3] makes it clear that as late as December 1876 he still expected to be living at Sydenham in the spring. But in 1909 Thomas had little more to go on; his list of Jefferies' work for 1876 contains only three items, suggesting that not much work was being done and that Jefferies was taking it easy at Shanklin Villa. Recent discoveries force a very different conclusion. Many more articles are now known to have been published then than the three cited by Thomas. Many of these have been discovered recently by John Pearson and listed in his book *Landscape and Labour*; a few more have been found since. In addition, Dr Pearson's work on the 1876 notebook, the one that so defeated Samuel Looker, has revealed in painful detail that Jefferies was making strenuous and persistent efforts that year to break into the London literary world.

By the start of 1877 he had succeeded, yet in spite of the progress he made, we have Jefferies' own words to assure us, if we were still in any doubt, that his year at his aunt's was not a happy one; indeed, how could it be? In his autobiography, *The Story of My Heart*, he states [p.72] 'A bitterer time still came when it was necessary to be separated from those I loved . . . In the course of slow time happier circumstances brought us together again, and, though near London, at a spot where there was easy access to meadows and woods.' There, he has said it, 'happier circumstances'. It is these circumstances that I want to set before you and explain what it was about them that made these five years, both personally and professionally, so happy and so satisfying for Jefferies.

² Letter to Ellen Harrild dated 'Sunday 1868', BL Add. 58822. The letter begins: 'I arrived safely at Coate'

³ See letter quoted by Oswald Crawford, *The Idler*, Oct. 1898 at pp.294-5. Writing to him in December 1876, from Wiltshire, Jefferies said: 'I have spent the greater part of the year near town, I expect I shall be there in the spring most of the time. I stay in Sydenham Park at Shanklin Villa where if you should be in England I should be glad to meet you.'

It is somewhat artificial to separate the personal and the professional; they were, for Jefferies, closely intertwined, but the separation helps to make clear how momentous the move was. It is easier to start with his personal life, and to go first to his own new family consisting of himself, Jessie and the now 18-month-old Harold. They were re-united. They had been together under one roof for part of 1875 but that had been in Swindon, away from fields and trees. To add to that sorrow had been the misery of feeling a failure and of that failure being observed and commented on by all around. Now, in Surbiton, they were together and away from critical comment.

Even if he had had no wife and child, Jefferies would still have needed to distance himself from Swindon and the taunts and jeers about which he was later so ready to tell the world and for which searchers after local material about him have found so much evidence. In theory, one's friends and relations supply strength and encouragement in time of need. In fact, Jefferies' family and neighbours did supply both from time to time, but the need went on too long. He felt guilty and they lost hope. His own sensitivity to adverse comment made things worse. It was time to move away.

He was also sensitive about the failure of his father to make a success of the farm. No matter what explanation he found for the failure, and he found several, it did his father no credit, and since Jefferies had inherited a strong family pride, what hurt the family hurt him. He would have liked to have helped his parents. Failing that, he could at least remove himself and thus take one charge off them. Presumably there was still, in 1876, a supposition that the farm might be kept on. If, by 1877 when he moved, it was already clear that the farm would have to be sold to meet debts, then his move to London did not just take his burden off them, it took the anxiety of the forthcoming calamity off him. Since he could not prevent it, he could at least stay away; there is not much doubt that the actual selling up would have distressed him deeply.

It may sound callous to move away to London just when your family is in trouble; it might even suggest that there was a break with the family: no one seems to be able to decide how many times, if at all, Jefferies went back to Coate.⁴ But there was no lasting break; on the contrary, as I would like to show, mutual respect did not truly thrive between the parties until they had ceased to be in daily contact.

Part of the evidence is to be found in an article in the *Pall Mall Gazette* for 2 May 1879 called 'The Fields in April'. It was reprinted in *Chronicles of the*

⁴ He may have gone back in 1879 as Edward Thomas suggested in his book, *Richard Jefferies*, 1909. Thomas noticed, in the chapter entitled The Cuckoo Fields in *Round About a Great Estate*, that Jefferies claimed to have heard the cuckoo as late as 14 July in that year and Thomas assumed from this that Jefferies must have been in Coate then. But much of the descriptive matter in *Round About a Great Estate* is based on observations near Surbiton, and nothing certain can be deduced from this reference.

Hedges. Jefferies set out in detail his observations of birds and flowers and he stressed that it was in a district near London. Towards the end he said: 'It may be interesting to compare them with the following, taken some sixty miles to the westward.' There followed a similar, but shorter group of observations of what can only be Coate. Looker states that Jefferies was being sent nature bulletins by a member of his family.⁵ I would go farther and suggest that the member was his father. I think that, although the farm was sold in 1878, James and Elizabeth Jefferies did not leave it until 1879. I think that they had no source of income and paid no rent, continuing at the farmhouse 'on sufferance'.⁶ It is possible that they received money from Richard (and possibly from others too), the money from Richard being offered as payment for the reports. If this was so then not only did Jefferies not leave his parents to their fate, he actually tried to help.

What evidence is there for such payment? The only piece I have lies in the letters that James Jefferies sent to Dr Rake on 19 and 21 November 1896.⁷ In the former letter he says: 'I paid a visit to London when the Great Agricultural Show was held at Kilburn. My son was living at Surbiton he got me there and kept me three weeks or so it was before I left the farm at Coate he had a lot of information of me which in wrote in his Book Round About A Great Estate ...' The next letter to Dr Rake, of 21 November, thanks him for his very great kindness. Dr Rake must have asked if Mrs Jefferies (I assume that he meant Jessie, since he did not refer to his own wife as Mrs Jefferies) received anything from Jefferies' publishers. Because James Jefferies' letters have little punctuation it is not always clear what they mean although he is so direct, but what he says in reply to this assumed question is 'if Mrs Jefferies received anything from Publishers she could very well afford to make me a present I do not remember ever having one since my son's illness, when I was staying with them at Surbiton just commenced their prosperity . . . ' It is this slender evidence which suggests to me that Richard had, on at least one occasion, given his father a 'present'. I am simply guessing when I suggest that the reports from Coate which were incorporated into the newspaper articles, formed the justification for the presents.

Quite apart from the nature reports and the present, James Jefferies' letter mentions the other strong reason for asserting that though Richard had liberated himself from the cares of Coate he had not broken with the family there, or if he had, they were reconciled by 1879. For as James Jefferies says, he went to stay with his son at Surbiton. We do not know when he arrived. The show opened on 30 June. James may have arrived on 21 June since Richard's

⁵ Samuel Looker, ed. *The Nature Diaries and Notebooks of Richard Jefferies* 1948, p.139.

⁶ See unpublished fragment, originally part of *Amaryllis*, BL Add. 58816 for the source of this supposition.

⁷ Letters from James Luckett Jefferies to Dr Theodore Rake, BL Add. 58822.

notebook for that day includes the words: 'Change in the village in 10 years—every singly house altered.' It also said: 'Wintry June. Howling wind like winter—gloomy sky, everything late.' The Kilburn Show was something of a disaster. True the royal princesses came on the opening day, and the Queen herself later, but it rained and rained so that the thousands of people who came tramped through the mud because there were not enough duckboards and had a miserable time. Richard's notebook for 16 June had said 'Changed winter dress for summer, at last' and the change may have less to do with the weather than the fact that he was having his photograph taken.⁸ Perhaps the photograph was to give his parents. Rain or not, the two Jefferies, father and son, had plenty to occupy them. It is clear from the notebooks that for the rest of his stay in Surbiton, James Jefferies was steadily disgorging all his memories of farming life. Richard was noting it all down, to transform it all later into the loving, glowing account that was *Round About a Great Estate*. It suggests the greatest possible mutual regard. Richard had left Coate behind: he had in no sense repudiated his father.

Unfortunately, it does not follow from this that Jefferies had quite come to terms with the wasting away at Coate of what would have been his, the eldest son's inheritance. From his father he had acquired strong dynastic feelings, and though he hides or quells them temporarily, in the end they rise up to be examined in *Amaryllis at the Fair*. That he was in no sense indifferent to the loss of the land appears from a notebook entry for June 1878 [NB p.42]: 'No cards, hounds, horses, no cob to ride on, not a 2/- bundle of asparagus, or barrel of oysters, not a single bottle of champagne, absolutely nothing, yet £1 a day for 10 years muddled ... It is impossible. Yet he did it.'⁹

So much for the personal gains to Jefferies from moving away from Wiltshire. What can we say about Surbiton at that time and what sort of life did Richard and his wife enjoy there? The house they lived in still stands, though it is hard to recognize. It was not distinctive but, as we shall see, its position more than made up for any shortcomings. In later years Jefferies looked back on it, as on so many things, with disdain. In March 1884 he wrote in his notebook: 'The apartments at S. [Surbiton] the dreadful heaviness of them.'¹⁰ Perhaps, to begin with, the little family only rented part of the house and later took over more. There is, in the papers at the British Library,¹¹ Jefferies' copy of one of the leases of 2, Woodside. This copy is dated 24 February 1880 and may be a new lease, the first one having run out. It shows that the house belonged to Sarah, Mary, and Jane Waters of Kingston on Thames, and that the rent was £28 per year. His

⁸ Edna Manning, *Richard Jefferies; A Modern Appraisal*, 1984, frontispiece.

⁹ Notebook II June 1878, BL Add. 58818.

¹⁰ Notebook XII., BL Add. 58818.

¹¹ BL Add. 58817.

daily routine we can learn from Walter Besant's book,¹² Besant having learned the details from Jessie, after her husband's death. He had a light breakfast at eight and worked until about 11.30. He then went out for a walk, came back to lunch, his main meal at 1.0, and after that, slept for an hour by the fire. Another walk was followed by tea at 5.0 and more work in his study until 8.30. Supper was at 9.0 and bed by 11.0. This regular routine must sometimes have been broken because his articles and notebooks give us other details, especially about the night sky, and of course he went to London. He had to go to London to call on his publishers but there were visits for pleasure. His notebooks mention the ballet, his articles and stories make it clear that he went frequently, at one time, to the Royal Academy,¹³ and at least once he went to the opera. His note-book for 29 October 1881 has a bare mention of Don Giovanni; since the Italian Opera Company was giving a performance of Don Giovanni on that Saturday afternoon it seems fair to conclude that Jefferies, and we hope Jessie, were in the audience. Like W.H. Hudson, Jefferies did not approve of pets, but he, or it may have been Jessie, had a cat. He even mentioned it in one of his very matter-of-fact pieces for the *Livestock Journal*. This took the form of a letter on the subject of infestation, and in it he claimed that his neighbour, whose land abutted on Jefferies' garden, had said to him how pleased he was to see 'my cat catch two or three mice a day.'¹⁴

This brings us again to the situation of 2 Woodside, the semi-rural nature of which was such a consolation to him. Reading his essays and notebooks one can tell how well the area suited his needs, but we have no need to guess because he tells us himself. The essays in his book *Nature Near London* are almost all about Surbiton and the country round; in its Preface he states:

It is usually supposed to be necessary to go far into the country to find wild birds and animals in sufficient numbers to be pleasantly studied. Such was certainly my own impression till circumstances led me, for the convenience of access to London, to reside for awhile about twelve miles from town. There my preconceived views on the subject were quite overthrown by the presence of as much bird-life as I had been accustomed to in distant fields and woods.

In the essay 'Flocks of birds', which forms part of the book, he unbuttons a little further and says:

The first spring I resided in Surrey I was fairly astonished and delighted at the bird life which proclaimed itself everywhere.

¹² Walter Besant, *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies*, 1889, p.170-1.

¹³ 'Sipping the Season', *World*, 7 June 1876; 'The Nude in London', *World*, 12 June 1878.

¹⁴ *Livestock Journal*, 27 Sept. 1878, p.25.

Most of those essays, first published in *The Standard*, appeared in 1880; a few came out in 1881 and one in 1882, but the book itself, and presumably the Preface, appeared in 1883, after Jefferies had moved to Brighton. They suggest, as do so many of the essays written at Surbiton, that the area, both close to the house and further afield, was full of delights. Yet in this same Preface, Jefferies explains why he does not identify the places he describes. Fortunately, an alternative version of the essay 'Round a London Copse' exists and was published after his death by Charles Longman.¹⁵ It was called 'The Spring of the Year' and was re-published by Edward Thomas in his book *The Hills and the Vale* in 1909. It contains the same material as 'Round a London Copse' but the presentation is more relaxed, Jefferies seems, in a literary sense, to have his jacket off. It is an essay that repays reading for the steady picture it gives us of Jefferies and his family using the garden of number 2, and the house, as a lookout for birds. He mentions numerous places by name too: Worcester Park, Cooper's Field, Tolworth Common, (this was just across the road from his house) The Red Lion Inn and Red Lion Lane, Clay-gate Lane, St Matthews Church, the Hogsmill Brook, Cockrow Hill, Southborough Park, Long Ditton Road, the Thames at Kingston Bridge, the Wandle at Wimbledon, Tolworth Court, the Ewell Road, Roxby Farm, Chessington Lane, Bone's Gate, Oakhill Path, the Waffrons, and finally, back to the Thames at Messenger's Eyot. You can't be much more specific than that.

The situation of his house had one more important advantage: it was on the railway line to Waterloo and it was near several other places of interest. If he had to go to London, a short walk over Waterloo Bridge brought him to the Strand and the streets roundabout where his publishers had their offices. If he wanted distraction, Surbiton was near the Thames, it was near Kew, which he enjoyed for its quiet, it was near Hampton Court, and all the places mentioned earlier. He even went to the Derby at Epsom, though more for the spectacle than the racing.¹⁶

These, then, were the 'happier circumstances' that Jefferies referred to in *The Story of My Heart*. James Jefferies had unerringly put his finger on it when he said that this time marked the commencement of 'their Prosperity', short-lived though it turned out to be. In other words it was a good time for Jefferies personally. In a special and limited sense, the time at Surbiton also coincided with Jefferies' professional fulfilment. The only book of Jefferies examined here so far has been *Nature Near London*, but it had had a string of illustrious predecessors. Jefferies' output even now, 100 years after all this time, amazes one. The list of his essays, articles, and stories has always been long; it gets longer as more and more unsigned pieces are recognised and brought to light. I

¹⁵ *Longmans Magazine*, June 1894.

¹⁶ 'Trees in and around London' in Looker, ed. *The Old House at Coate*, 1948, p.127.

want now, to concentrate on Jefferies' writing and the effect of these five years on his fame and fortune.

We must go back a little. Until about February 1877 when Jefferies moved into 2, Woodside, he had been working for the *North Wilts Herald*. Since he had spent 1876 with his aunt at Sydenham we must assume that his work, such as it was, for this newspaper was on a freelance basis. He was, in 1876, earning very little money. Given only the information that Thomas had in 1909, one might consider Jefferies' move to London somewhat rash. We have seen, however, that he had published more in 1876 than had been suspected and, in addition, he had made an arrangement beginning in 1877 and extending into 1878 that Thomas did not know of, to write an article a week for a paper called *The Livestock Journal and Fancier's Gazette*. For each of these he was paid a guinea and a half—enough for the week's rent and a pound a week over; not enough to live in any style but a good foundation. His third big novel, *World's End*, that he had been working on for the whole of the winter of 1876-7, came out early in 1877, but was a failure, and he never attempted that sort of book again. He despised the market at which he was aiming it. So what were the Jefferies living on? To begin with, although he gave up novels, he had not given up fiction. Some years earlier he had written the story of Maximin, a commander who takes his men into battle and leads them, through every kind of adverse terrain, towards a promised land. John Pearson discovered this story and has written about it.¹⁷ It was eventually published in instalments in the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1876 and 77. Jefferies also supplied short stories to a publication called *London Society*, only two of which were signed. These two were later reprinted by Vizetelly—'Kiss and Try' and 'Out of the Season'.¹⁸ It is possible that as many as six more articles or stories in *London Society* may be by Jefferies, though they are not signed. One is entitled 'A Midnight Skate';¹⁹ another, 'St Valentine's Lottery', concerns a young artist, Frank Hilary.²⁰ We first come across the young man out of doors in February, enjoying that brief warm spell that sometimes arrives to help us through the winter, and the description of this opening scene could only have been written by Jefferies. The stories must have brought in money but no increment to his reputation, indeed they may have postponed further Jefferies' discovery of what he could do best. These stories were not all: Pearson has found articles in *Graphic*, *Globe*, and *World*, for the year 1877 that were not previously known as well as more articles in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, a paper to which Jefferies had been submitting work on a small

¹⁷ John Pearson, unpublished thesis: 'Richard Jefferies, an edition of newly discovered work', University of Exeter, 1980.

¹⁸ *London Society*, vol. 30, 1876, pp.237-40; *ibid.* vol. 31, 1877, pp.97-104.

¹⁹ *ibid.* vol. 30, 1876 Xmas number, pp.57-62.

²⁰ *ibid.* vol. 31, 1877 pp.170-80.

scale since 1870. And there have been other items. In the light of this new knowledge the move to London does not seem rash at all.

From the point of view of Jefferies and his fortunes, the most significant of these publications was the evening paper, the *Pall Mall Gazette*. It was owned by the incomparable George Smith, and its editor, from its founding in 1865, had been the equally renowned Frederick Greenwood. Smith was a rich man who also owned the publishing firm of Smith, Elder and Co. It is often assumed that Smith made his money out of these two publishing ventures but, though neither enterprise ran at a loss, he in fact made his money out of more mundane products, the chief of which was the table water, Apollinaris. Smith also had a large share in the Aylesbury Dairy Company which operated from Swindon. Publishers like to publish journals as well as books; the journals help to spread the load of work and the inflow of funds. A journal is also useful for advertising the firm's books to the reading public, and serves as a nursery for new authors. Frederick Greenwood prided himself, justifiably, on his skill in spotting and bringing on talent. He was especially tender towards Jefferies. In an article in *Country Life*, written in 1904, he said, in an attempt to account to himself and to the world for the fact that Jefferies had never become truly popular: 'while admiration for him as a writer does not lessen, neither does it seem to extend. As one of those who shared his hopes before they were fully justified. I confess that I have never understood that limitation.'

Greenwood's technique was to get a young man to write him anything he liked about a subject that really interested him. In this way the best would emerge and from it Greenwood could make his judgement. Just when Greenwood tried this out on Jefferies is not clear, but it may have been at the end of 1876 because we know, from Jefferies' letter to Oswald Crawford in December of that year, that Jefferies was thinking out the material that was to take the form, late in 1877 and after, of *The Gamekeeper at Home* and *The Amateur Poacher*. Greenwood himself was fond of long country walks and he loved to read good descriptions of them: he was responsible for setting Jefferies' feet on this path. He had written descriptions of nature before, he had written about rural people before, he had written stories in instalments before, but he had never before gathered all three ingredients together, and neither had anyone else.

This unheralded beginning marked a fairly abrupt change in Jefferies' professional life and set him on the road towards his very special fame and his ultimately dubious fortune. It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate that the fresh direction of Jefferies' writing was a direct outcome of his deliberate move to Surbiton. It was not just that in 1876 he came to London: what also matters is that he marched away from what had hitherto been his place and his people. That place, Coate, Chiseldon, Liddington, the downs, Savernake, and those people, his father and mother chiefly, but also his aunts and cousins, had

been his all-in-all. They were the origin of all his strong feelings, both joy and sorrow, but they were also a restriction and a limitation. Without them he would have had nothing to write about. So long as he was there, among them, and aware of their intolerance of what he was attempting to achieve, he simply could not see them clearly and so could not conjure them into literature. Once settled in Surbiton, a place that minded its own business, he could turn and look his place and his people in the face. The turning and writing synchronised. It was an act of liberation, a thaw after an icy spell, an illumination after much groping in the dark. It changed everything.

The articles that formed the five 'country' books, the famous five, are still, even at this distance, something of a surprise. What attracted people to them was their charm, and still does. Yet, how can this charm be explained? Several of his more factual articles, to say nothing of later fiction, (I am thinking of things like Chapter XXI of *Amaryllis*) are so pungently bitter that we would know that all had not been well for Jefferies in Wiltshire, even if he had not said so in letters and notebooks. So how did he achieve that early buoyancy? In part the light touch in these five books can be put down to technique: Jefferies had set out to write in what he himself called 'a chatty style' in order to please his readers. But there is more to it than this; the child that in the essay 'My Old Village' sat at the old hatch as happy as a king and watched the sparkle on the brook seems quite to dominate in these early books, it is his hand that seems to be guiding the pen, his feet that tread the springy turf. Jefferies in Surbiton was free, he had escaped, he was away; from where he stood in his comfortable suburb, Coate and his times there looked good. It was an irony that his presentation copy of *The Gamekeeper at Home* reached his mother just as the farm around which it is written passed from her possession.

The happy meeting between Richard and his father in 1879 has already been described; James Jefferies had finally admitted defeat over the farm and, at the age of nearly 62, decided to follow one of his sisters to Bath and earn a modest living as a gardener. In no sense disgraced by this in his son's eyes, he passed on his knowledge, not so that his son could be a farmer but so that he could write about it for others. Richard, who had also been seen as a failure, was no longer a disgrace but a success. No wonder that *Round About a Great Estate* has such mellow tones. Yet James, in his letters to Rake, put his finger on another important puzzle—the one posed above, how could Richard write so temptingly about what was nothing but a failure. His actual words were: 'how he could think of describing Coate as such a pleasant place and deceive so I could not imagine, in fact nothing scarcely he mentions is in Coate proper only the proper one was not a pleasant one . . .'²¹ He scorned the farm as being only 40 acres and so not worth the name of farm. His son got round this problem by

²¹ James Jefferies to Dr Rake 21 November 1896.

permitting his readers to think that the estate he wrote about was a large one, perhaps ten times the size of his father's. It was not until the more general of the five books, *Hodge and His Masters*, that the romance begins to fade away and we begin to rub against the real world.

The *Pall Mall Gazette* provided Jefferies' passport to this long awaited success in the person of its editor Frederick Greenwood. One only wishes he could have come to the rescue sooner. From a letter to Greenwood dated 29 March, and assumed to be from 1878, we learn that Jefferies had received a great deal of advice and encouragement from this and that he had felt able to take that advice: 'I feel the articles would never have been written had it not been for your kindly encouragement, and in addition they have had the benefit of your literary knowledge in the elimination of unnecessary phrases and various other ways.'²² In a letter to Jefferies dated merely 10 March but sent in 1878 or possibly 1879 Greenwood told him off for trying to write in a 'tricky flashy manner', perhaps in a manner similar to that used in the novel *World's End*. Greenwood also tried to help him place a novel with Bentley by writing to Bentley for him. The letter, dated 23 September 1878, recommended a 'novel of Country Life'.²³ The title is not given but it sounds like *Greene Ferne Farm*. Bentley did not publish it. But Jefferies was grateful to Greenwood. He is said to have sent him copies of every edition of *The Gamekeeper*.²⁴

He may have shown his loyalty in a more self-sacrificing way. The facts are these. Greenwood was very valuable to Smith as editor of the *Pall Mall* but his political leaning in the 1870s was noticeably towards the Tories, especially Disraeli. Smith did not share this tendency. In 1878 Smith's daughter married and two years later Smith transferred the ownership of the *Pall Mall* to his new son-in-law Henry Yates Thompson. Greenwood was asked to be less partisan. Greenwood regarded this as interference with his editorial freedom and on 1 May 1880 resigned, taking some of the staff with him. On 31 May he presided over the first copy of the new journal the *St. James's Gazette*. Jefferies' first article for it appeared in June and many more followed, but he did not cease to write for the *Pall Mall*. What did happen, was that after *Greene Ferne Farm*, which was already, in May 1880, being printed by Smith Elder, no more of Jefferies' books were published by that house. We have no evidence that the initiative for this change came from Jefferies. The rupture may have come about on purely commercial grounds, or it may be that Jefferies had decided that he could no longer do business with George Smith for personal reasons, but it can have done no good to Jefferies. Cassell, to whom he went next, were not straightforward with him though they paid him £150 for *Wood Magic*.²⁵ George

²² Letter reproduced in J.W. Robertson Scott, *The Story of the Pall Mall Gazette*, 1950, pp.186-9.

²³ Looker and Porteous, p.112.

²⁴ Robertson Scott, p.190.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p.264.

Smith, it must be added, bore Jefferies no grudge: he was one of Jefferies' referees, though not, as far as we know, at Jefferies' request, when he made his appeal in 1886 to the Royal Literary Fund.²⁶

By 1880, Jefferies was doing extremely well. As the list of his books shows, three new titles came out in that year, and for *Hodge and His Masters*, Smith paid him £300,²⁷ the most he was ever to get. He must have felt he could keep this up for ever. Editors were approaching him for work, not he them, and the editor of a literary dictionary, who came to Jefferies asking for biographical details, was politely rebuffed.²⁸ In September 1879 he went to Brighton for about a month, part holiday, part work.²⁹ In 1880 he went away again, this time to Eastbourne, staying at 28 Devonshire Place.³⁰ From there it was a short journey to Pevensey Castle. At Pevensey Jefferies wrote the first notes for what was later to be his autobiographical book *The Story of My Heart*. Entries in his notebooks indicate that he had been preparing in a tentative way for some time to express his thoughts about the experiences he had had on the downs when he was about 16 and continuously since. Of their importance to him there was no doubt; the misgivings came when he tried to find a vehicle for expressing them. Towards the end of *The Story of My Heart* he described how at last he was able to begin: 'At last, in 1880, in the old castle of Pevensey, under happy circumstances, once more I resolved, and actually did write down a few notes. Even then I could not go on, but I kept the notes and in the end, two years afterwards, began this book.'³¹ I quote this sentence, from which my title has been taken, to show that in 1883 when he was writing it, Jefferies himself was ready to admit that 1880 at least had been a happy time. And not simply happy; it was a time when he had such confidence in his skill that he could attempt this most difficult and demanding enterprise. Later still, he looked back again, pitying his own error: under the heading 'Experiences' he wrote in his notebook in January 1887:

I cannot look back on the past of my life without dread. Bridge rail at Syd. my high hopes that twelve months and then the next time there and then the five years. Always trying to strip away and begin again: at Surbiton and would have done so again after 'well' if I could, and would now.³² [He had written the word 'well' in his notebook for 5 January 1883.]

²⁶ Copy of Agreement, BL Add. 58827.

²⁷ Archives of Royal Literary Fund.

²⁸ George Smith to Jefferies, 22 Jan. 1880. BL Add. 58822.

²⁹ Letter to H.J. Nicoll, quote in bookseller's catalogue of G.M. and R.C. Davies, item 113, July 1980.

³⁰ Notebook VI 8 Sept. 1879, BL Add. 58820; Jefferies arrived on the 8th, J [Jessie] on the 5th, see entry for 5 Sept.

³¹ Letter from Smith to Jefferies, 9 Sept. 1880, BL Add. 58822.

³² *The Story of My Heart*, 1979. Quartet edn. p.134.

Those words were written long after he left Surbiton. In 1880 and early in 1881 he is still fit and well, surprisingly so, for one who was working very hard indeed. The five Wiltshire books, dealing with 'my place' and 'my people' were followed by two books that went straight into book form: *Wood Magic* and *Bevis*. These books were, one might say, an attempt to write about himself, and both books have continued to find favour ever since they appeared, in spite of flaws in both. The first copies of *Bevis* appeared as Jefferies packed up and left Surbiton to begin the next phase of his life, in Brighton, stripping away and beginning again, but he was not finished with Surbiton. The essays that were collected to form *Nature Near London* have already been examined, but only for clues as to Jefferies' attitude to Surbiton as a place to live. Their literary significance was not examined but it must be. Edward Thomas devotes the whole of his Chapter X to the subject of the essays that Jefferies wrote about Surbiton, the new place that was not 'my place', and draws attention there to the view that these essays are of a different kind from the earlier Wiltshire books. He notices less exuberance, 'the eye that sees and the mind that broods over it is changed. . . Thoughts have troubled and checked it.'³³ I am not sure that I agree, though I do agree with the next observation 'the new surroundings are not a part of him as were the old.'³⁴ This is important; the new surroundings have nothing to do with his memories, painful or joyous. He is therefore more objective and there is, in spite of much loving and moving expression, not so much rapture. Since at the time he was writing these essays his energies were also taken up with *Wood Magic*, which is partly a study of himself, and then with *Bevis* and *The Story of My Heart* which were even more an examination of himself, it is not surprising, indeed it is reassuring, that Jefferies could respond so well to that much-despised entity, a London suburb. His work, hitherto, had consisted of three main kinds: the sort of business-like journalism that he sold to the *Livestock Journal*; the stories about the well-to-do, which he could sell but which never grew into anything worthwhile; and the country books like *The Gamekeeper* which were an undoubted success but which could not go on for ever. It would have been a poor look-out for him as a professional writer if he had not had this new vein of material to mine. It led ultimately, but after he had left Surbiton, to such golden offerings as 'Wild Flowers' and 'The Pageant of Summer'. It was very important.

There was a price to pay. Physical separation from Wiltshire and from the unsuccessful farm freed Jefferies to follow two more profitable paths: one, just described, was writing creatively about his present milieu, whatever it was; the other was writing creatively about what he had left. These were gains, but there was a corresponding loss. The first was separation from agricultural life. Though he went on writing essays and articles and pieces of semi-fiction on the subject

³³ Notebook XIX Jan.-Feb. 1887. BL Add. 58820. ff.60-61.

³⁴ Thomas.

of the agricultural labourer, he gradually lost touch, and his expressed views acquired a journalistic, second-hand flavour.³⁵ The other loss, which anyone who must write to live is the first to lament, was subjects about which it was possible to feel passionately. Jefferies interested himself in various other matters, including what he called 'the labour question' and what we would probably call 'socialism' but he lacked wide knowledge of it. As a result he was unable to write with authority on the subject of the agricultural labourer after about 1880. Entries in his notebooks show that this lover of children was deeply upset and angered by tales of neglect and cruelty to children reported in newspapers, though he touched on it only in 'Bits of Oak Bark'. It was probably not a subject that his editors cared for and so was never developed. After he had left Surbiton, impoverished and beaten back by illness, much of his anger and passion was turned inward to examine this undeserved misfortune.

He was unaware of this in 1880, when he sat in the sun at Pevensey, and felt strong enough to begin his autobiography; his future still looked good. A new baby, Jessie Phyllis, was born in December. Early in 1881 he began writing for *Land*, a new magazine from Cassell, the firm that was publishing *Wood Magic*. He was feeling sufficiently optimistic to consider starting his own paper, and obtained estimates from a printer for the cost of production.³⁶ He began to write for *The Times*, and received a cordial response to his approach to the editor of the *Saturday Review*.³⁷ He was writing *Bevis*, and thinking about the portrayal of Felise for the novel that was to become *The Dewy Morn*. In fact all seemed rosy, until a faint hint of trouble to come is slipped into an essay for the *Standard* in September 1881. He was talking about frosty weather and said: 'to those who are well, every step is bracing . . .' and from this hint we must assume that he was already not well. In December he was really ill and had to undergo an operation which, not being successful, had to be repeated three more times. It was a terrible blow to him although he finished *Bevis* and sold it to Sampson Low in January 1882 for £100,³⁸ having fared none too well with Cassell. Someone must have advised him to move his home, perhaps to distract him from his adversities. He must in any case by mid-1882 have come to associate Surbiton with illness and would have wanted to leave. He had long been attracted to Brighton and to the seaside generally, and there he went in June or July of 1882. There were triumphs and joys aplenty to come but the 'happy circumstances' would never be quite the same again.

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ e.g. 'The Wiltshire Labourer', *Longmans Magazine*, Nov. 1883.

³⁷ BL Add. 58817.

³⁸ BL Add. 58822 (letter dated 26 July 1881)

Postscript.

On 9 March 1986 Hockley Clarke and Peter Robins visited the Surbiton lanes once so regularly trodden by Jefferies, beginning at Tolworth, in Robins' words, 'a drab busy interchange on the A3.' He went on:

Just off a dual carriageway was a deserted road, which Hockley pointed out was where Jefferies walked and wrote about in essays collected in *Nature Near London*. Here he watched trout in the Hogsmill stream and described Tolworth Court Farm and its huge barn.

Today, the road leads to some playing fields and then bends to exit on to the same dual carriageway. It is therefore deserted, but bears evidence of suburban fly-tippers and is a likely haunt of courting couples at night. A stream runs on both sides of the road, meandering around the tin cans and plastic bags. Hard to believe trout swam here. The bridge Jefferies used to observe the fish is gone. The barn was burned down by drunken hooligans turned out from 'The Toby Jug' on Saturday night, some years ago. One building of the farm and a few corrugated sheds are all that is left. A lone horse in a muddy field neighed at us in desperation.

The lane was once tree-lined, but one side has been felled, perhaps as a consequence of Dutch elm disease, and only stumps remain. I imagine it was beautiful a hundred years ago, and it gave me pleasure to spot a long-tailed tit hopping among some fallen branches.

Phyllis Treitel
April 1986