

A Dialogue with Nature: Richard Jefferies' *Wood Magic*

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Preface: Jefferies' Fiction

Richard Jefferies wrote as many as ten works of fiction, but his reputation as a writer of novels is not very high. He has been criticized for trying to produce fiction when he might have concentrated on writing essays about the natural world.¹ The main difficulty seems to be that his fiction does not fit into the traditional novelistic categories.

The history of English fiction contains many kinds and embraces many forms, but the indisputable ingredient is an invented story based on credible human lives. However, E.M. Forster, who recognized many forms of fiction, considered the French critic Abel Chevalley's definition, "a fiction in prose of a certain extent," as adequate for most purposes.² In other words, so long as the work is of sufficient length, it does not matter whether it is based on actual life, and it can take many forms or concern itself with any theme.

If we consider all this, it does not seem appropriate to discuss the details of Jefferies' novel form. His novels are not valued highly because of lack of subtlety in his plots and lack of vividness in his characters. Jefferies' critic H.S. Salt wrote: "his instinct was that of the naturalist who observes and moralizes rather than of the novelist who penetrates and interprets; and consequently his rustic characters, though strongly and clearly drawn, do not live, as for example those of Thomas Hardy live."³ Salt also remarks that Jefferies' character-sketches of men "are just as realistic and externally faithful as his description of animals," but this does not help him to construct a story from such material because "men and animals are alike mere figures in his landscapes."⁴ He fails to give coherence and unity to his scenes, and "even 'Jefferies-land' does not impress itself on the reader's mental vision in the way White's 'Selborne' does."⁵

1. Reasons for his Continuing to Write Novels

Are Jefferies' fictions hopelessly unworthy? His first novel, *The Scarlet Shawl* (1874), now rarely read, dealing with two lovers going through crises but emerging happily, is devoid of convincing feminine psychology, and the plot is banal and uninteresting. As A. Rossabi noted, it would be absurd to claim it even as "a particularly interesting specimen of a bad novel."⁶

¹ Edward Garnett, 'Introduction' to Richard Jefferies *Amaryllis at the Fair* (Duckworth, 1904).

² E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (Edward Arnold, 1927), p.9.

³ H.S. Salt *Richard Jefferies: A Study* (Swan Sonnenschein, 1896), p.110.

⁴ *ibid.*, p.111.

⁵ *ibid.*, p.111.

⁶ Andrew Rossabi, "The Scarlet Shawl," *The Richard Jefferies Society Journal*, No.4. (Spring 1995), p.20.

Edward Thomas, who had felt an affinity with Jefferies since his childhood, was the critic who carefully considered Jefferies' early novels for the first time, but he had no kind words to say about *The Scarlet Shawl*. Thomas called it "this most vulnerable book"⁷ and considered it far from the real Jefferies. When this unsuccessful novel was published, Jefferies was a twenty-six-year-old journalist working for a local newspaper and feeling bored and unhappy with his work. The reason for its failure may have been his desire to portray rich people's lives, about which he knew nothing, instead of writing about the people around him.

The next novel was *Restless Human Hearts* (1875). At the time Jefferies wrote three other novels but these remained unpublished. Jefferies was delighted with *Restless Human Hearts* saying it was his best so far.

What were the reasons for Jefferies' persistence in writing novels despite **their** poor reception? Some critics believe it was because fiction represented the most profitable literary form. However, considering that the last work published in his lifetime was a novel, *Amaryllis at the Fair* (1887), and also considering other factors, it cannot be said that Jefferies was merely aiming for monetary profit. Wasn't it rather because he had a deep desire to express his emotional and spiritual feelings towards nature in a form in which he could use more imagination than in the essays on practical farming and natural history that he was continuing to publish in newspapers and magazines at this time? Edward Thomas, who knew Jefferies' early novels well, felt the same way, and wrote that, "though he failed and wrote some inept things, ... he was seeking to satisfy a need for another life than was being lived around him."⁸

Although some of the descriptions in Jefferies' first novels were excellent, they did not gain him a reputation. However, Jefferies kept on writing and moved from his native Swindon to Surbiton, a suburb of London, in 1877 in order to live closer to Fleet Street. He lived in Surbiton for five years, and there wrote two of his most successful country books, *The Gamekeeper at Home* (1878) and *The Amateur Poacher* (1879), and several more novels.

2. Nature in *Wood Magic*

Jefferies never returned to Swindon after he moved to Surbiton, but in his writings he went home twice, in *Wood Magic: A Fable* (1881) and *Bevis, The Story of a Boy* (1882). Both are fictions based on his childhood experience and laced with imaginary incidents.

In *Wood Magic*, the young Bevis talks to birds, animals, insects, a brook, and the wind, and they answer him. Birds and animals are assumed to possess the same kind of experience and interests as Bevis himself. Bevis is short-tempered, adventurous, and given to day-dreaming, but he is a child of the real world. For some readers it may seem odd to see the child involved in a world of animals. It is also something of a shock that he wrote vividly about cruelty on the part of animals and claimed different gods for animals and people. However, since the book was written for children and subtitled *A Fable*, it is not so surprising that he depicts a magic world in which reality and imagination are blended,

Bevis, who can communicate with birds and animals, joins their conferences because he is supposed to know something about firearms. The fields, woods, and hills belonging to the human landowners are seen as part of the magpie empire. In this book there is fighting between the chief magpie and the chief wood-pigeon about their respective territory, and the main plot and subplot develop into all kinds of devious actions and adventures just as in the human world.

⁷ Edward Thomas *Richard Jefferies: His Life and Work* (Hutchinson, 1909), p.103f [actually p.96].

⁸ *ibid* [p.96].

Above all, Jefferies' skill as a naturalist is best demonstrated in the conversation between Bevis and the inhabitants of the natural world, as well as in the names he assigns to the birds. Let us look at this section of his writing. A swallow is flying close to Bevis. When Bevis asks him to come closer, the swallow replies:

"I shall not come any nearer, Bevis. Don't you remember Bill, the carter's boy, put a ladder against the wall, and you climbed up the ladder, and put your paws, all brown and dirty, into my nest and took my eggs? And you tried to string them on a bennet, and the bennet was too big, so you went indoors for some thread, and you made my wife and me dreadfully unhappy, and we said we would never come back *anj* more to your house, Bevis."

"But you have come back, swallow."

"Yes, we have come back—just once more; but if you do it again, we shall go away for ever."

"But I won't do it again; no, that I won't! Do come near."

So the swallow came a little nearer, only two yards away, and flew backwards and forwards, and Bevis could hear the snap of his beak as he caught the flies.

"Just a little bit nearer still," said he. "Let me stroke your lovely white back."⁹

Although he has taken eggs from the swallow's nest, it is obvious that Bevis loves the swallow. His love of animals is also shown in the episode where he lets the weasel escape from a snare. The weasel has killed a baby rabbit, and the mother rabbit reproaches Bevis. His heart aches for the rabbit, and he tries to shoot the weasel, but he escapes. When Bevis fails to catch a grasshopper he is laughed at as follows:

"Are you not the stupid boy everybody is laughing at for letting the weasel go? You will never catch the weasel."

"I'll stamp on you," said Bevis, in a great rage.

Jefferies, who had loved birds from his childhood, gave interesting names to the birds in this story: Kapchack for the king magpie, Choo Hoo for the emperor wood-pigeon, Tchack for the chaffinch, Cloctaw for the jackdaw, Te-te for the woodpecker, and Kauc for the crow. He skilfully renders the chirpings of the birds at the court of King Magpie:

"Tree-wheel" said the wood-pigeon.

"Hum! Haw I" said the crow.

"Law! Daw!" said Cloctaw.

Jefferies demonstrates the basic difference between the natural world and the human world by indicating the prime characteristics of birds, animals, and insects. In the natural world, every creature—magpie, jay, wood-pigeon, hawk, weasel, squirrel, fox—flies, runs, or crawls around freely. They don't care about human property. Bevis is often laughed at as a typical human being within the world of living things. The following passage occurs when Bevis asks a grasshopper why all the birds come down to bathe on Midsummer Day:

"Why?" replied the grasshopper; "I never heard anybody say anything about that before. There is always a great deal of talk going on, for the trees have nothing else to do but gossip with each other; but they never ask why."

... "Why don't you hop straight?" said Bevis, presently. It seems to me that you hop first one side and then the other, and go in such a zig-zag fashion it will take us hours to reach the brook."

⁹ *Wood Magic: A Fable*, (Longmans Green, 1916).

"How very stupid you are," said the grasshopper. "If you go straight of course you can only see just what is under your feet, but if you go first this way and then that, then you see everything. You are nearly as silly as the ants, who never see anything beautiful all their lives. Be sure you have nothing to do with the ants, Bevis; they are a mean, wretched, miserly set, quite contemptible and beneath notice. Now I go everywhere all round the field, and spend my time searching for lovely things; sometimes I find flowers, and sometimes the butterflies come down into the grass and tell me the news, and I am so fond of the sunshine, I sing to it all day long. Tell me, now, is there anything so beautiful as the sunshine and the blue sky, and the green grass, and the velvet and blue and spotted butterflies, and the trees which cast such a pleasant shadow and talk so sweetly, and the brook which is always running? I should like to listen to it for a thousand years."

The grasshopper despises the mean ants who toil at storing food but never notice the beauty of the sun and never gaze at the stars. But there is also pathos when the grasshopper says that he'll die at the end of the summer so there is no need to store food. Jefferies borrows the grasshopper's mouth to sing his ode to nature: "My store and my wealth is the sunshine, ... the blue sky, and the green grass, and the delicious brook who never ceases sing, sing, singing all day and night." And as if to deny Aesop's fable, "The Ant and the Grasshopper," Jefferies declares that the joy of life is to know the joy of the outdoors. Jefferies wrote many times in his other writings about the greatness of nature when he lay down on the ground and looked up at the endless blue sky.¹⁰ But in *Wood Magic* he wrote that Bevis loves the sky just as he loves his mother (p.15) and he thinks that he could climb up to the sky if he had a sufficiently long ladder. These are Bevis's words, but Jefferies adored the high, clear, blue sky all his life.

3. A Dialogue with the Brook

The two important dialogues in *Wood Magic* are those between Bevis and the brook and Bevis and the wind. "Brook, Brook, tell me what you are singing," Bevis asks, but the brook does not reply at first. At Bevis's urging, he eventually answers:

"I do not know myself always what I am singing about. I am so happy I sing, sing, and never think about what it means. ... Sometimes I sing about the sun, who loves me dearly, and tries all day to get at me through the leaves and the green flags that hide me. . . . Sometimes I sing to the wind, who loves me most dearly." (p.153)

The brook sometimes sings to the earth, to the fields, and at night to the stars. And sometimes to the trees, because trees and grass suck up the water from the brook, and where trees and grass are, birds come and drink from the brook and bathe. The brook is part of a rich environment where birds and fishes can live freely—that is why the brook feels happy.

The brook thinks only about the present. It does not think about the past or the future. It never thinks about where the water in the brook comes from or where it is going. Although it is flowing, why is water always there? The passage of time is often likened to the flow of a river. Young Jefferies saw the mystery of time, the movement *from* moment to moment, in the flow of the brook. The brook says to Bevis, laughingly: "I do not know where I come from, and I do not care at all where I am going. ... All I know is I shall come back again" (p.155) It sounds *very* sad when the brook says that eventually it *flows* into the sea. Then Bevis says: "Stop a little while and think about it."

¹⁰ See Akio Kadoi, "Of Man and Nature Described by Richard Jefferies," *English and American Literature Review* (Winter 1994).

"Oh no, Bevis; I cannot stop, I must keep running. Nothing can stop. . . . the trees cannot stop growing, they must keep on growing till, they die; and then they cannot stop decaying, till they are all quite gone, but they come back again." (p.156)

Jefferies' ideas concerning mutability and recurrence are expressed here. When *Wood Magic* was published in 1881, six years before his death, Jefferies was already in declining health and becoming conscious of death.

4. A Dialogue with the Wind

The last chapter of *Wood Magic* contains a conversation between Bevis and the Wind. There Jefferies' love for the outdoors is expressed impressively. Bevis and the Wind have a race on the hill like two wild animals. At first Bevis leaves the wind behind, but the wind catches up and Bevis starts to pant:

"Come up here, my darling Sir Bevis, and drink me as often as ever you can, and the more you drink of me the happier you will be, and the longer you will live. And people will look at you and say: 'How jolly he looks! Is he not nice? I wish I was like him.' And presently they will say: 'Where does he learn all these things?'" (pp.372-3)

Asked by Bevis how old he is, the Wind answers: "I am older than all the very old things. I am as old as the brook." But the wind doesn't say anything more about himself. He says he has forgotten his stories, but "they are still there in my mind—if you keep on drinking me I shall tell you ..." (p.373)- And he seems to know more than the brook or the tree because he travels everywhere: "indeed, all they know I have taught them myself. The sun is always telling me everything, and the stars whisper to me at night; the ocean roars at me, the earth whispers to me; just you lie down, Bevis love, upon the ground and listen"(p.373).

Bevis overhears a conversation between the wind and the earth, and the wind says to Bevis: "There never was anything I cannot remember, and my mind is so clear that if you will but come up here and drink me, you will understand everything" (p.373). By feeling the wind of nature with his body, everything will be understood. This "everything" is all-encompassing and Jefferies seems to include in the wind's words all greatness and marvels, the existence of self in nature, and even the philosophy of nature. It also seems as if he would emphasize the importance of touching the air and saturating himself in nature from childhood. This is suggested by the following words of the wind:

"Bevis, my love, if you want to know all about the sun, and the stars, and everything, make haste and come to me, and I will tell you, dear. In the morning, dear, get up as quick as you can, and drink me as I come down the hill. In the day go up on the hill, dear, and drink me again, and stay there if you can till the stars shine out, and drink still more of me.

"And by-and-by you will understand all about the sun, and the moon, and the stars, and the earth which is so beautiful, Bevis." (p.374)

Bevis sat down on the grass, closed his eyes, and listened to the wind which caressed his hair. There were no words to the song, but Bevis understood it all, and it made him feel happy. Jefferies believed firmly that if you want a child to think deeply and respond to pure emotion, you should take him to the woods and hills and let him feel the vastness of the earth.¹¹

¹¹ See Richard Jefferies' *The Dewy Morn* (Bentley 1884), chapter 21.

Conclusion

What Jefferies wanted to convey in this fable-like imaginative story, *Wood Magic*, was the minds of living things. To achieve this, he sends Bevis into the world of living things and has him listen to their opinions and understand how birds and animals are inconvenienced by selfish human behaviour. He teaches the importance of looking everywhere to see the beautiful things in nature, rather than walking straight like ants.

What Jefferies wanted to convey in *Wood Magic* is expressed in the dialogues between Bevis and the brook and Bevis and the wind. The brook talks about time and eternity, the mutability of things on earth, and the kindness of nature. The wind talks about the importance of being in nature, and the significance of being surrounded by the beauty and wonder of the natural world.

In Jefferies' view, if you breathe the air deeply on the hills and stay there till the stars shine, eventually everything—the sun, the moon, the stars, and the earth—will be understood. This is his mysticism, and it is close to the attitudes of Buddhist mysticism.