

Richard Jefferies, Nature Mystic [slide 1]

We begin with a few general remarks; continue with a short biography illustrated by extracts from Jefferies' writings; and wind up with proposing reasons why he is still well worth reading 175 years after his birth, indeed why his 'message' is needed today more than ever.

Though best remembered as a nature writer, one of the purest and most sensitive produced by a country that has always prided itself on the strength of its nature tradition, Jefferies was much more. He wrote at least as much about people as about nature and has an important role as a social historian. If you want to know about the lives of the men and women who worked on the land in late Victorian England at a critical period in its history, want to know about squires, farmers, and labourers, as well as more marginal figures such as gamekeepers and poachers, and about old customs, local lore, rural crafts, dialect words, country sayings, then Jefferies is your man: there's no better informed or more readable guide. The

relevant volume of the authoritative *Agrarian History of England and Wales* on the open shelves at the British Library cites Jefferies more often than any other writer, Thomas Hardy included. Again, Jefferies wrote four novels of permanent worth. He wrote two children's stories that have become classics. His spiritual autobiography *The Story of My Heart* is recognized as a classic of nature mysticism, saluted by William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* as 'Jefferies' wonderful and splendid mystic rhapsody'. Finally, Jefferies is in the central tradition of the plain English prose style. In short, Jefferies was 'a comprehensive and many-sided genius'.

Two years before his death in 1887, he wrote an essay in which he recalled his delight as a boy in finding the wildflowers that grew in the fields and hedgerows of his father's farm. He went on:

If we had never before looked upon the earth, but suddenly came to it man or woman grown, set down in the midst of a summer meadow, would it not seem to

us a radiant vision? The hues, the shapes, the song and life of birds, above all the sunlight, the breath of heaven, resting on it; the mind would be filled with its glory, unable to grasp it, hardly believing that such things could be mere matter and no more. Like a dream of some spirit-land it would appear, scarce fit to be touched lest it should fall to pieces, too beautiful to be long watched lest it should fade away. So it seemed to me as a boy, sweet and new like this each morning; and even now, after the years that have passed, and the lines they have worn in the forehead, the summer meadow shines as bright and fresh as when my foot first touched the grass.

The passage might serve as the motto to all Jefferies' work. Few writers have responded so acutely to the beauty of the creation or rendered it in such simple and moving language. Few save the poets have made the spiritual aspect of nature come alive with such power. Jefferies gives the lie to his own aphorism: 'The sheaf [of grass] you may take home with you, but the wind that was

among it stays without.’ [slide 2] It is precisely the subtle essence breathed whenever we step out of doors that Jefferies miraculously captures on the printed page. The air outdoors has a specific virtue, derived from its free movement. In *The Gamekeeper at Home*, the book that made his name, Jefferies puts his open-air philosophy into the keeper’s mouth:

“It’s indoors, sir, as kills half the people; being indoors three parts of the day, and next to that taking too much drink and vittals... there ain’t nothing like fresh air and the smell of the woods. You should come out here in the spring, when the oak timber is throwed... and sniff up the scent of that there oak bark. It goes right down your throat, and preserves your lungs as the tan do leather... I’m in the woods all day, and never comes home till supper... so I gets the fresh air, you see; and the fresh air is the life, sir. There’s the smell of the earth, too—’specially just as the plough turns it up—which is a fine thing; and the hedges and the grass are as sweet as sugar

after a shower. Anything with a green leaf is the thing, depend upon it, if you want to live healthy.”

The Green Party should put that in their manifesto. In sum, no one better conveys the sense of mental enlargement that comes from being outdoors. ‘All things,’ Jefferies wrote, ‘seem possible in the open air’. [slide 3] Again, no writer has such wholeness in his response to the natural world.

If Jefferies was struck by the glory of the Creation, he was equally responsive to the miracle of his own existence:

The fact of my own existence as I write, as I exist at this second, is so marvellous, so miracle-like, strange, and supernatural to me, that I unhesitatingly conclude I am always on the margin of life illimitable, and that there are higher conditions than existence. Everything around is supernatural; everything so full of unexplained meaning.

Richard Jefferies was born in 1848 at Coate near Swindon in North Wilts, son of a dairyman. [slides 4–7] [James Luckett Jefferies was an original and slightly eccentric man. It was he who first taught Richard about natural history. His son remembers him identifying Donati's Comet in the night sky long before its arrival was reported in the newspapers. A niece recalls the intense blue of his eyes, 'like pieces of sky fallen to earth', and his showing her an adder he had caught on an island on Coate Reservoir. He pinched its neck and made it open its mouth, to show her it was not the quivering forked tongue that was the danger, but the sharp tooth further back in the jaw. He had a pet blackbird in the rickyard that used to come running when he whistled a certain stave. He usually had a bit of bacon for it. He devoted more time to embellishing his garden and orchard than to the practical business of running a farm. He had an especial feeling for trees. He didn't bustle about like some of them, recalled a neighbour. He was handicapped by lack of capital and a provision put on his will by his father. James mortgaged the farm to pay off

two sisters, was unable to pay the interest, sank ever deeper into debt, the creditors eventually foreclosed, and James was forced to sell up and became an odd-job gardener in Bath.]

Jefferies was proud of his descent from generations of Wiltshire farmers, who had farmed the lonely upland parish of Draycot Foliat since the days of William and Mary. Wrote Jefferies biographer, the poet Edward Thomas:

A fair land is this on a still, rainy, and misty winter day, with its wide, unoccupied fields and dreaming trees—no men, no sound, and the downs as imaginary as the sea-noise in a shell. [slide 8]

[The name of Edward Thomas is inseparable from that of Richard Jefferies. He wrote Jefferies' biography and was greatly influenced by him. He is best known as a poet, who took nature and the countryside and its people for his themes. He greatly influenced later poets such as W.H. Auden, Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes, and Seamus Heaney.

Perhaps his best-known poem is ‘Adlestrop’, about a train making an unscheduled stop at a small country halt.

Before becoming a poet, Thomas worked as a book reviewer and publisher’s hack, churning out books to order. By contrast, the Jefferies was a commission after his own heart and its writing became a labour of love. Thomas had known and loved Jefferies’ works since boyhood. He was also familiar with Jefferies’ country, having Welsh relatives in Swindon with whom he stayed during the summer holidays. He even briefly acquired a Wiltshire accent. His *Life and Works of Richard Jefferies*, published in 1909, is recognized as a classic in literary biography. When a friend asked him why he enlisted, he picked up a piece of dry chalky earth, crumbled it through his fingers, and said, ‘Literally, for this’. Thomas was killed at the Battle of Arras in 1917 by the blast from a shell. He was one year older than Jefferies, who died aged 38. His widow Helen wrote a moving memoir entitled *As It Was and World Without End*. It’s in Faber paperback and is strongly recommended.

Thomas began his biography with a chapter on the country of Richard Jefferies, that part of Wiltshire where he had been born and spent most of the first twenty-seven years of his life. He said Jefferies was the genius, the human expression, of that country, and could not be detached from it ‘any more than the curves of some statues from their maternal stone’. Thomas said it was ‘a beautiful, a quiet, an unrenowned, and a most visibly ancient land’. He spoke of its quiet unloquacious men and said that Jefferies ‘came to express part of this silence of uncounted generations.’]

To return to the Draycot Jefferies: some were substantial men, to judge by their chest tombs placed in a privileged position near the porch of Chiseldon church. Jefferies’ great-grandfather Richard, after whom he was named, was a shrewd businessman who bought the chief mill and bakery in Swindon, and later ‘for his quiet enjoyment’ a small estate in the outlying hamlet of Coate (pronounced *cawt* in the local dialect).

However, if Jefferies was a true son of the soil, an autochthon, it was country blood with a difference. Fleet Street ink as well as Wiltshire chalk and cheese went into his make-up. Both Jefferies' grandfathers, maternal and paternal, worked for Richard Taylor of Red Lion Court off Fleet Street, a leading printer of natural history and scientific works. All Taylor's books carried the device of a Roman oil lamp being filled by a disembodied hand, above the motto *alere flammam*, to feed the flame [of learning]. Taylor's plaque remains on the wall of his former premises. [slide 9] The Jefferies were related by marriage to the printing families of Harrild, Baxter, and Billing. Jefferies' great-uncle Robert Harrild introduced the composition roller, which greatly speeded the printing process, and the Harrild presses became internationally famous. In his poem 'The Press' Rudyard Kipling speaks of how 'roaring like the gale,/ The Harrild and the Hoe devour/ Their league-long paper bale.' George Baxter of Lewes invented colour printing; the two-volume illustrated Baxter Bible was a Victorian bestseller.

Jefferies' mother Betsy was a kindly, outgoing, town-bred woman not happy living on an encumbered farm in a rural backwater. However, she was remembered for the excellence of her butter. Traumatized by the death of her first child, a five-year-old girl named Ellen, killed by a runaway horse on the road between Coate and Swindon, she felt unable to cope with looking after Richard, who between the ages of four and nine was fostered by an aunt and uncle, Ellen and Thomas Harrild, returning to Coate for the summer holidays. The Harrilds lived at Shanklin Villa in Sydenham. [slide 10] Jefferies bonded with his aunt Ellen, who became his confidante, and virtually a second mother. [slide 11] His affectionate letters to her form a diary of his adolescence and early manhood. He said he was happier with her than at home 'because you enter into my prospects with interest and are always kind'. His visits to Shanklin Villa were high days and holy days.

Jefferies attended various schools in Swindon and left school at fifteen. Largely self-educated, he was a voracious reader, his favourite authors Homer, Goethe,

Cervantes, Shakespeare, Longfellow, and Fennimore Cooper. To find money to buy books he wired rabbits and hares which he sold to the carriers who crossed the downs. He read the ancient classics in translation. 'Everything beautiful is Greek,' he told his aunt. Meanwhile he did no work on the farm apart from splitting wood and gained a reputation as an idler. He spent his time mouching about the fields with a gun or roaming the downs that rose south of Coate. Tongues wagged. 'That young Jefferies is not the sort of fellow you want hanging about your covers,' complained the local squire. 'Seed you owt up on the downs,' one labourer would enquire of another. 'Nobbut Dick Jefferies mooning about,' came the reply. Finally, even his father turned against him and pointed in disgust to 'our Dick poking about in them hedges'. He became an outsider in the local community, dubbed 'Moony Dick', 'a lazy loppet', and 'nowt of a farmer'. To his aunt he described himself as 'a poppy in a cornfield'. When he was sixteen he ran away from home with a cousin from across the road at Snodshill. They intended to walk to Moscow but

once in France their French did not take them far and they returned to England. Perhaps fearing parental retribution, instead of going home, they caught a train to Liverpool after seeing an advertisement for a cheap passage to America. The fare did not include the cost of food and bedding and when they tried to pawn their watches to raise the necessary money they were arrested by the police and sent home in disgrace.

Superficially idle, Jefferies was in fact living in a ferment of unrealised ideas and indeterminate aspirations. [slide 12: fresh unworldly face, full of youthful idealism, like a long-haired hippy of the 1960s.]

He began to make pilgrimages to places where he could be alone:

There was a feeling that I must go somewhere, and be alone. It was a necessity to have a few minutes of this separate life every day; my mind required to live its own life apart from other things.

Immediately on rising he went out to a group of elms which gave 'a clear view of the east':

I looked at the hills, at the dewy grass, and then up through the elm branches to the sky. In a moment all that was behind me, the house, the people, the sounds, seemed to disappear, and to leave me alone. Involuntarily I drew a long breath, then I breathed slowly. My thought, or inner consciousness, went up through the illumined sky, and I was lost in a moment of exaltation. [Thomas researched books on mysticism to write the chapter on *SH* and learned that this way of breathing was that practised by practitioners of yoga.]

In his autobiography he tells us

I was not more than eighteen when an inner and esoteric meaning began to come to me from all the visible universe, and indefinable aspirations filled me... There was a deeper meaning everywhere. The sun burned with it, the broad front of morning beamed with

it; a deep feeling entered me while gazing at the sky in the azure noon, and in the star-lit evening.

I was sensitive to all things, to the earth under, and the star-hollow round about; to the least blade of grass, to the largest oak. They seemed like exterior nerves and veins for the conveyance of feeling to me. Sometimes a very ecstasy of exquisite enjoyment of the entire visible universe filled me. I was aware that in reality the feeling and the thought were in me, and not in the earth or sun; yet I was more conscious of it when in company with these.

There were times of spiritual drought, when Jefferies felt eager 'to drink deeply once more at the fresh fountains of life'.

There was a hill to which I used to resort at such periods. The labour of walking three miles to it, all the while gradually ascending, seemed to clear my blood of the heaviness accumulated at home. On a warm summer day the slow continued rise required continual

effort, which carried away the sense of oppression. The familiar everyday scene was soon out of sight; I came to other trees, meadows, and fields; I began to breathe a new air and to have a fresher aspiration. I restrained my soul till I reached the sward of the hill; psyche, the soul that longed to be loose. I would write psyche always instead of soul to avoid meanings which have become attached to the word soul, but it is awkward to do so. Clumsy indeed are all words the moment the wooden stage of commonplace life is left. I restrained psyche, my soul, till I reached and put my foot on the grass at the beginning of the green hill itself.

Moving up the sweet short turf, at every step my heart seemed to obtain a wider horizon of feeling; with every inhalation of rich pure air, a deeper desire. The very light of the sun was whiter and more brilliant here. By the time I had reached the summit I had entirely forgotten the petty circumstances and the annoyances of existence. I felt myself, myself.

There was an intrenchment on the summit, and going down into the fosse I walked round it slowly to recover

breath. On the south-western side there was a spot where the outer bank had partially slipped, leaving a gap. There the view was over a broad plain, beautiful with wheat, and inclosed by a perfect amphitheatre of green hills. Through these hills there was one narrow groove, or pass, southwards, where the white clouds seemed to close in the horizon. Woods hid the scattered hamlets and farmhouses, so that I was quite alone.

I was utterly alone with the sun and the earth. 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 earth's firmness—I felt it bear me up; through the grassy couch there came an influence as if I could feel the great earth speaking to me. I thought of the wandering air—its pureness, which is its beauty; the air touched me and gave me something of itself. 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; I desired to have its strength, its mystery and glory. Then I addressed the sun, desiring the soul equivalent of his light and brilliance, his endurance and unwearied race.

I turned to the blue heaven over, gazing into its depth, inhaling its exquisite colour and sweetness. The rich blue of the unattainable flower of the sky drew my soul towards it, and there it rested, for pure colour is rest of heart. By all these I prayed; I felt an emotion of the soul beyond all definition; prayer is a puny thing to it, and the word is a rude sign to the feeling, but I know no other.

In 1866 Jefferies began work as a reporter on a local newspaper. [He remained a journalist from first to last. Lacking a private income, he was entirely dependent on what he earned by his pen.] As well as reporting farmers' club meetings and police court proceedings, he published satirical poems, sensational tales, and histories of Malmesbury and Swindon. Because of its mushroom growth he dubbed Swindon the 'Chicago of the western counties' and painted a vivid picture of the railway factory.

In 1867 and again the following year he was seriously ill, suffering fever, weakness, and prostration. His legs

became ‘as thin as a grasshopper’s’; his head seemed to swell ‘big enough to fill the room’. When convalescing, it cost him as much effort to take thirty steps as to walk thirty miles previously. The illnesses were the first signs of tuberculosis, consumption as it was then known.

Jefferies attracted wider notice in 1872 with a long letter in *The Times* on the Wiltshire labourer. The national farmworkers’ union had been formed earlier that year and labourers in many counties were agitating for better pay and conditions. There was much public debate of the rights and wrongs of their case. It was the major topic of the day. In his letter Jefferies defended the tenant farmer class and adopted a condescending attitude to the labourer, whom he claimed was adequately paid and housed. The letter provoked much comment for and against. Singularly well-informed and a model of clear and forceful exposition, it opened the door for Jefferies to a career as an agricultural journalist.

His farming articles were later collected and published as *The Toilers of the Field*. ‘The Labourer’s Daily Life’

presented a more sympathetic portrait of the farmworker than the letter to *The Times*:

To rise at five of a summer's morning, and see the azure of the sky and the glorious sun, may be, perhaps, no great hardship, although there are few persons who could long remain poetical on bread and cheese. But to rise at five on a dark winter's morning is a very different affair. To put on coarse nailed boots, weighing fully seven pounds, gaiters up above the knee, a short greatcoat of some heavy material, and to step out into the driving rain and trudge wearily over field after field of wet grass, with the furrows full of water; then to sit on a three-legged stool, with mud and manure half-way up the ankles, and milk cows with one's head leaning against their damp, smoking hides for two hours, with the rain coming steadily drip, drip, drip—this is a very different affair.

The 'fogger' on a snowy morning in the winter has to encounter about the most unpleasant circumstances imaginable. Icicles hang from the eaves of the rick, and

its thatch is covered with snow. Up the slippery ladder in the dark morning, one knee out upon the snow-covered thatch, he plunges the broad hay-knife in and cuts away an enormous truss—then a great prong is stuck into this, a prong made on purpose, with extra thick and powerful handle, and the truss, well bound round with a horse-hair rope, is hoisted on the head and shoulders. This heavy weight the fogger has to carry perhaps half-a-mile through the snow; the furrows in the field are frozen over, but his weight crashes through the ice, slush into the chilly water. Rain, snow, or bitter frost, or still more bitter east winds—‘harsh winds,’ as he most truly calls them—the fogger must take no heed of either, for the cows must be fed.

A quart of threepenny ale for breakfast, with a hunch of bread and cheese, then out to work again in the weather, let it be what it may. The cowyards have to be cleaned out—if not done before breakfast—the manure thrown up into heaps, and the heaps wheeled outside. Or, perhaps, the master has given him a job of piece-work to fill up the middle of the day with—a hedge to

cut and ditch. This means more slush, wet, cold, and discomfort. About six or half-past he reaches home, thoroughly saturated, worn-out, cross, and 'dummel.' I don't know how to spell that word, nor what its etymology may be, but it well expresses the dumb, sullen churlishness which such a life as this engenders. For all the conditions and circumstances of such a life tend to one end only—the blunting of all the finer feelings, the total erasure of sensitiveness. The coarse, half-cooked cabbage, the small bit of fat and rafty bacon, the dry bread and pint of weak tea, makes no very hearty supper after such a day as this. The man grows insensible to the weather, to cold and damp; his bodily frame becomes crusted over, case-hardened; and with this indifference there rises up at the same time a corresponding dulness as regards all moral and social matters.

Fiction offered the royal road to fame and fortune, and Jefferies published three early novels, partly at his own expense. The trio showed technical clumsiness and were

critical and commercial failures but fortified 'the spiritual something in his nature' that could not be satisfied by his admirably practical and often prescient articles on farming. The novels contain isolated passages that give a foretaste of his mystical response to nature:

Neville reposed upon the grass under the shadow of a tree, till the warmth of the sun filled his veins with a drowsy, slumberous, yet intense vitality, while the leaves danced in slow and intricate measure between him and the sky, and the clouds sailed onwards to their havens far away below the horizon... He lost all sense of his own separate existence; his soul became merged in the life of the tree, of the grass, of the thousands of insects, finally in the life of the broad earth underneath, till he felt himself as it were a leaf upon the great cedar of existence. Then he lost all sense of joy or pain, of hope or fear, of ambition, of hatred and jealousy, even of love. He was merged in the great soul that binds all things together. It was the Nirvana—the extinction of existence, and yet the entrance into true existence.

Time, thought, feeling, sense, were gone, all lost; nothing remained but the mere grand fact, the exquisite delight, the infinite joy of existence only.

In 1877, now married to his childhood playmate Jessie Baden, daughter of a neighbouring farmer, [slide 13] and the father of a small boy, Jefferies moved to Tolworth near Surbiton to be nearer his London editors, while retaining a foothold in the country. Tolworth was then still largely rural, consisting of farmland, wood, and commons. Separation from his native county acted as a memory trigger and in Tolworth Jefferies wrote and published the books that made his name. They first appeared as serials in London daily newspapers and were later collected and published in volume form under titles redolent of the countryside. *The Gamekeeper at Home*, *Wild Life in a Southern County*, *The Amateur Poacher*, *Round About a Great Estate*, and *Hodge and His Masters* were all based on Jefferies' memories of Wiltshire, which he evoked, like Hardy's grandmother, 'not as one who remembers, but as one who sees'. The reviewers hailed Jefferies as the natural

successor to Gilbert White, and reading their eulogies one has the impression that a new planet had swum into their ken. At this date it is hard to appreciate how great was the reputation Jefferies once enjoyed. The books established him as the foremost nature and country writer of his day. Wrote Thomas:

No one English writer before had had such a wide knowledge of labourers, farmers, gamekeepers, poachers, of the fields, and woods, and waters, and the sky above them, by day and night... When he wrote these books—*The Amateur Poacher* and its companions—he had no rival, nor have they since been equalled in purity, abundance, and rusticity.

In appearance Jefferies was tall, thin, bearded, his figure slightly stooping. He had brown hair, clear blue eyes, somewhat drooping eyelids, broad intellectual brow, and calm meditative expression, 'silent and aware'. He eschewed literary society, according to one who knew him, in order to preserve his native sensibility. However,

in 1880 he attended a dinner given by the publisher George Smith: the other guests were Henry James, Matthew Arnold, and Thomas Hardy. A man of simple tastes and regular habits, Jefferies found his deepest joy in the solitary contemplation of nature. Otherwise, he was perfectly content with his family.

Jefferies believed in animal intelligence. He instanced a young dog coming to the bank of a brook across which his master had previously leapt:

The dog races to the bank—he has been hitherto hunting in a hedge and suddenly misses his master—and, like his lord, stops short on the brink. He has had but little experience in jumping as yet; water is not his natural element, and he pauses doubtfully. He looks across earnestly, sniffs the air as if to smell the distance, then whines in distress of mind. Presently he makes a movement to spring, checks it, and turns round as if looking for advice or encouragement. Next he runs back a short way as if about to give it up; returns, and cranes over the brink; after which he follows the bank up and

down, barking in excitement, but always coming back to the original spot. The lines of his face, the straining eye, the voice that seems struggling to articulate in the throat, the attitude of the body, all convey the idea of intense desire which fear prevents him from translating into action. There is indecision—uncertainty—in the nervous grasp of the paws on the grass, in the quick short coursings to and fro. Would infallible instinct hesitate? He has no knowledge of yards, feet and inches—yet he is clearly trying to judge the distance. Finally, just as his master disappears through a gateway, the agony of his ‘mind’ rises to the highest pitch. He advances to the very brink—he half springs, stays himself, his hinder paws slip down the steep bank, he partly loses his balance, and then makes a great leap, lights with a splash in mid-stream, and swims the remainder with ease. [slide 14]

Jefferies followed up his country books with *Wood*

Magic and *Bevis*, two children's stories in which he first expressed the mystical feelings he had received from nature since boyhood and youth.

In *Wood Magic* the little boy Bevis understands the language of the birds and wild creatures, as well as that of the brook, reeds, and wind. They teach him valuable lessons, as when he asks the grasshopper why he doesn't go straight.

"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."

When Bevis asks the brook why he sounds so happy, the brook replies:

"I do not know. Perhaps it is because all I think of is this minute; I do not know anything about the minute just gone by, and I do not care one bit about the minute that is just coming; all I care about is this minute, this very minute now".

Bevis learns about the unreality of time:

"My dear," said the brook, "You people who live now have made up all sorts of stupid, very stupid stories, dear; I hope you will not believe them; they tell you

about time and all that. Now there is no such thing as time, Bevis my love; there never was any time, and there never will be; the sun laughs at it, even when he marks it on the sun-dial. Yesterday was just a second ago, and so was ten thousand years since, and there is nothing between you and then.

The brook's message is echoed by the wind on the hill:

"There never was a yesterday," whispered the wind presently, "and there never will be to-morrow. It is all one long to-day."

Bevis is regarded by many as the best boys' book ever written. It recreates large tracts of Jefferies' childhood at Coate whose reservoir, imaginatively transformed into an uncharted sea, becomes the focus of the adventures of Bevis and his friend Mark. They build a raft, learn to swim, rig a boat, teach themselves to sail, make a matchlock, and maroon themselves on an island where they lead a Crusoe-like existence, living off the fish they catch, the

wildfowl and animals they trap or shoot. The novel celebrates the unconscious education imbibed in the open air. It records Bevis's visionary moments, when he feels out to sun and stars and is lost in 'the larger consciousness of the heavens', the moments, too, when something seemed to take him out of himself, and he became abstracted, and 'still as a tree'.

Greene Ferne Farm is a charming pastoral notable for its use of Wiltshire dialect, snips of rustic lore, such as the hay a thrifty farmer stuffs into his boots in lieu of stockings, and lyrical description of a sunrise. Critics compared the novel favourably with Hardy's *Under the Greenwood Tree*.

Nature Near London is a collection of articles about the wealth of wildlife to be found in the vicinity of the capital. In Tolworth Jefferies was astonished by the amount of bird life. Never had he heard so many nightingales. He was the first to point out how wildflowers found sanctuary from the scythe on railway cuttings and embankments. However, he missed the deep peace he

had known in the country. ‘Hills that purify those who walk upon them there were not.’

The five years in Tolworth were a quinquennium of literary success, domestic happiness, and financial security. In 1880 Jessie gave birth to a girl, named Phyllis.

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In December 1881 Jefferies fell ill with a fistula. It marked the reactivation of the tuberculosis that had plagued his late adolescence and was to kill him within six years. He underwent four operations. The pain was excruciating, ‘like lightning through the brain’. In 1882 he moved to Hove to convalesce.

The recovery of chalk hills like those of his native Wiltshire; the added presence of the sea, which always fascinated him; and intimations of mortality brought by his illness spurred Jefferies to write an autobiography of his inner life, a book about which he had been meditating for seventeen years, from the time when ‘an

inner and esoteric meaning' had first come to him 'from all the visible universe'. The sea was a potent factor. In the late summer of 1880, while on holiday at Eastbourne, Jefferies stood on the shore beneath Beachy Head:

All the petty ways of narrow life are shut off behind by the ponderous and impassable cliff; as if we had dwelt in the dim light of a cave, but coming out at last to look at the sun, a great stone had fallen and closed the entrance, so that there was no return to the shadow. The impassable precipice shuts off our former selves of yesterday, forcing us to look out over the sea only, or up to the deeper heaven.

These breadths draw out the soul; we feel that we have wider thoughts than we knew; the soul has been living, as it were, in a nutshell, all unaware of its own power, and now suddenly finds freedom in the sun and the sky. Straight, as if sawn down from turf to beach, the cliff shuts off the human world, for the sea knows no time and no era; you cannot tell what century it is from the face of the sea. A Roman trireme suddenly

rounding the white edge-line of chalk... would not seem strange. What wonder could surprise us coming from the wonderful sea?

The Story of My Heart records Jefferies' moments of ecstatic communion with nature, visions of eternity, and dreams of a world freed from want and needless toil. A failure on publication, it is now regarded as the centrepiece of his work. Jefferies himself called it a 'Long Paean of Soul to God, a paean in itself of its own existence'.

His last four years were a heroic struggle against what he called the three giants of Disease, Despair, and Poverty, but he continued to write and dictated to his wife when too weak to hold a pen. [slide 16] He studied books on tuberculosis and wrote an account of his illness. He suffered ulceration of the small intestine and compared the internal pain to a rat gnawing at a beam or the burning of corrosive sublimate. He feared to travel by train lest he should throw himself out. In April 1885 his health finally broke down. The wasting of his body was

extreme; he was starved and half delirious. In September 1885 his spine suddenly seemed to snap and he went down 'as if shot'. He could not sit or lie without distress. Writing a short note made his pulse beat as if he had been using a sledgehammer. Any heavy footfall in the room hurt him, the jar shaking the injured intestine. For seven months he was helpless, so weak he could not dress himself. He compared himself to a living man tied to a dead one: mind alive, body dead. In the summer of 1886 he vomited blood. His savings went on doctors' fees, and in November, after initial refusal, he accepted a grant of £100 from the Royal Literary Fund. Six months before his death he wrote in his notebook:

Torture./ Many have died once: I have/ had the misery
of dying many times & the presence of it for/ years...
/Slobbering food for months /like an imbecile old
man/ Handkerchief—drop not able/ to pick it up./
Writing a letter—effort./Carefully arrange to do a
dozen things/at one rising or going upstairs./ Chair to
chair—no rest./ Neither lie, stand, walk, sit, without
distress./Not stoop lest kill me...

His greatest suffering, however, was mental. Confined to his room, he had to commune with nature at second hand, through the prison bars of his window:

To-day through the window-pane I see a lark high up
against the grey cloud, and hear his song... Without
me to tell him, how does this lark to-day that I hear
through the window know it is his hour to sing?

In March 1887 he had another haemorrhage and could not even dictate.

Thomas well said that Jefferies' ill-health was 'nothing to record, except as something triumphed over by the spirit of life'; and miraculously, during these years of intense physical suffering, Jefferies produced some of his finest work. *The Dewy Morn*, described as 'one of the few real novels between *Wuthering Heights* and *Sons and Lovers*', is notable for its biting satire of a vacuous squire and his do-gooding wife, but above all for the portrait of its heroine Felise, a perfect child of nature. In Thomas's words:

She is a beautiful lover, born not out of the bitter sea [like Aphrodite] but out of the streaming dew that makes the grass sweeter than honeycomb.

In a memorable passage Jefferies urges his readers:

All of you with little children, and who have no need to count expense, or even if you have such need, take them somehow into the country among green grass and yellow wheat—among trees—by hills and streams, if you wish their highest education, that of the heart and the soul, to be completed.

Therein shall they find a Secret—a knowledge not to be written, not to be found in books. They shall know the sun and the wind, the running water, and the breast of the broad earth. Under the green spray, among the hazel boughs where the nightingale sings, they shall find a Secret, a feeling, a sense that fills the heart with an emotion never to be forgotten. They will forget their books—they will never forget the grassy fields.

After London, a futurist romance much admired by William Morris, depicts nature taking over after some unspecified ecological disaster: the fields lie uncultivated, England relapses into barbarism, southern England is drowned beneath a freshwater sea, and London lies buried beneath a miasmal swamp.

In *Amaryllis at the Fair* Jefferies returns to the world of Coate and his father's farm, slowly sinking under a tide of debt. 'There are no wolves,' said Jefferies, 'like those debt sends against a house'. The novel is memorable for the character of Farmer Iden, a thinly disguised portrait of his father. Iden is 'a great mind working under the most unhappy conditions'. When he plants potatoes, a sack over his shoulders his only protection against a brute March wind, it is with the greatest care and attention: 'had he been planting his own children he could not have been more careful'. Over table he lauds forty-fold potatoes, woodfire-cooked mutton, and Blenheim Oranges (a variety of apple). When he naps after lunch, he pretends to sleep while allowing the mice to run up his leg for the crumbs in his lap. He bathes his feet in the

dew of a lawn of an evening, and his oakwood gates are 'built for all time, and not for the little circumstance of the hour'. A critic said he would turn out several highly regarded novels by Hardy to make room for *Amaryllis at the Fair* on his shelf.

By their blend of reflection and description the essay collections *The Life of the Fields*, *The Open Air*, and *Field and Hedgerow*, the last edited by his widow and published posthumously, extend the boundaries of the form. They include impassioned meditations such as 'The Pageant of Summer' and 'Hours of Spring'; pieces of close scientific observation on the hovering of the kestrel; and a documentary tale about a reaper who works fourteen hours a day in the August sun, with its stark conclusion: 'The wheat is beautiful, but human life is labour'. [slide 17]

After Brighton Jefferies was nowhere long. From June 1884 he lived at Eltham in Kent. His sense of colour became more acute. During the long hot summer of 1884 he would take his folding-stool, sit in the shadow of some elms, and gaze at a cabbage-field overgrown with

poppies—green cabbage, scarlet poppies, and scores of white butterflies—because ‘to me, colour is a sort of food; every spot of colour is a drop of wine to the spirit’. [slide 18] In 1885 his infant son died suddenly of meningitis. Jefferies was so distressed he was unable to attend the funeral. [slides 19–20]

After Eltham Jefferies was briefly at Rotherfield in Sussex, where the nearby chapel inspired one of his finest essays, ‘The Country Sunday,’ before moving to Crowborough, high-perched in the Sussex Weald, and finally to Goring-by-Sea. The window of his bedroom looked across wheatfields to the sea. [slides 21–22] His son recalled his father identifying the rig of the ships passing in the Channel. Jefferies died on 14 August 1887, aged thirty-eight. He was buried in Broadwater Cemetery, Worthing. [slide 23] There was then no NHS safety net, and he died destitute, his savings spent in doctors’ fees. A fund was raised, sufficient to send Jefferies’ son Harold to Dulwich College.

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In recent years Richard Jefferies has been oddly neglected. I say 'oddly' because never has 'nature' been more at the forefront of people's consciousness, with widespread alarm felt at the effects of climate change and the rapid extinction of species from Planet Earth, a loss for which one species, *homo sapiens*, is almost entirely responsible. The pioneer conservationist Rachel Carson kept two bedside books, one Thoreau's *Walden*, [slides 24–25] the other *The Story of My Heart*.

Again, never has the peace to be found in communion with nature and the green world been found so necessary in a world of increasing turmoil. Green is the most restful of colours, midway between the centripetal warmth of yellow and the centrifugal cold of blue. Mindfulness has become mainstream, almost commonplace. A century and a half before Eckhart Tolle, Jefferies was teaching the doctrine of the Eternal Now. He denied the existence of time, which he said was a purely man-made invention. Dipping his hand into the running waters of a brook, he

concluded that his soul never had been and never could be similarly dipped in time:

Time has never existed, and never will; it is a purely artificial arrangement. It is eternity now, it always was eternity, and always will be. By no possible means could I get into time if I tried. I am in eternity now and must there remain. Haste not, be at rest, this Now is Eternity.

[slide 26]

There is a wealth of passages in Jefferies that depict nature as a perpetual spring from which we may draw spiritual nourishment and at least something of that peace which ‘passeth all understanding’.

Shortly before he died, Jefferies wrote a preface to a new edition of *The Natural History of Selborne* by Gilbert White. There he gave the would-be naturalist two invaluable pieces of advice. First, he stressed the need for ‘absolute quietness’, [slide 27] ‘for it is in this quietness that the invisible becomes visible’.

Second, he underlined the importance of following White's example and studying one's own locality. He urged the beginner to begin at home:

The greatest variety of information is generally gathered in a very small compass. I have noticed that people are never so astonished as when some fact of natural history is unexpectedly pointed out to them, where it must have been for a long time under their very eyes. There are people who have never seen a humble bee drill a hole in the nectary of a snapdragon, and yet have whole gardens full of flowers.

It was one of Jefferies' perennial themes that nature was all about us, even in the very heart of the city, had we but eyes to see. There was no need to go haring off into the wilds of the country to court her. [slide 28] 'The sunlight and the winds enter London, and the life of the fields is there too, if you will but see it.'

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We expect a nature writer to write naturally, and Jefferies writes with wonderful ease and fluency. He was the master of a plain style that Thomas said grew to his use ‘like the handle of a walking-stick’ and likened to a blackbird singing. Thomas also said that with Jefferies [slide 29] ‘the clearness of the physical is allied to the penetration of the spiritual vision.’

When Jefferies was near death, a neighbour at Goring saw him one day sitting by the vicarage wall. He was no longer able to walk far. As she was passing, he called her over and spent some time in pointing out the beautiful structure of the ivy covering the wall. [slide 30] ‘I never knew before then that there was so much in an ivy leaf.’

Listing the religious classics which had impacted upon his life—the Holy Bible, Book of Common Prayer, *The Imitation of Christ*, and *Pilgrim’s Progress*--an American vicar concluded:

One writer more: Richard Jefferies. I have all his books. In none does he mention the name of Jesus Christ. Baptised he was in 1849, an Anglican, but all his life

organized Christianity he ignored. The woods and fields, the hills and beaches, the song of birds and thoughts of ants—these are his themes, and he is part of these things, for he moves quietly amongst God's little creatures as though one of them, and yearns over them in a way which I can only call Christ-like. Any man who lives life like Jefferies commands immediate attention, and when he writes in language that brings the very winds of God blowing through one's room, that man is great in religious literature, though the word religion is hardly if ever found upon his pages.

In conclusion: Jefferies teaches us to observe what is before our eyes, to delight in the common sights and sounds of nature, to respond to them with his own heightened sensibility and visionary awareness, and so immeasurably enriches our lives. Like Farmer Iden, he was

a sort of Pan, a half-god of leaves and boughs, and reeds and streams, a sort of Nature in human shape, moving about and sowing Plenty and Beauty.

[end]