

PREFACE TO *THE NATURAL HISTORY OF SELBORNE* BY GILBERT WHITE

The short preface to *Selborne* is a minor addition to Jefferies' bibliography, but particular interest attaches to it. In the first place it is his only extended piece on another writer that we know of - he may have written some reviews but these have not been traced. It also embodies his thoughts on the great naturalist with whose work his own has often been compared. In his lifetime, especially, Jefferies was seen as Gilbert White's literary heir apparent. Further it is, in its modest way, a critical gem, a model - indeed a marvel, of apt and appreciative comment. And finally it is of value as one of the last things he wrote, certainly the last to appear between the covers of a book.

According to Ernest Rhys, who was to become the distinguished founder editor of Everyman's Library, Edward Garnett 'inveigled into his rooms near Grays Inn Road an utterly unknown new publisher when we were both literary tyros; and a series of Lyric Poets and a whole library of prose authors was the outcome of that strange evening' (E50.1, pp.viii-ix). The prose library was The Camelot Classics (named after the first volume, *The Romance of King Arthur*, and later renamed The Scott Library), which Rhys edited from its inception in 1866. He describes his approach to Jefferies the following year:

I wrote to Richard Jefferies, not knowing he was very near his end, believing him a famous and prosperous author, in the very year of his death. We were putting White's *Selborne* into the Camelot Series, and Jefferies seemed the elect writer to introduce the book. But, to my surprise, when I sounded him, he said he had never read it, which appeared singular. Stranger still, to find that he whom I had thought so enviably popular was engaged in a desperate struggle for his very life - fighting, as he said, with the 'three Great Giants, Disease, Despair, and Poverty'. (E50.1,p.22)

Jefferies' remark that he had not read *Selborne* is at variance with a reference he had made to it in his prospectus for *The Heart of England*, c.1876 (see *HM* Introduction): 'Gilbert White in the *History of Selborne* set the example of minute observation of the habits of birds and animals, and a most interesting and instructive study it is' (E79.1, p.236). Also in 1876 an unpublished portion of his notebooks contains, according to one researcher, another reference suggesting Jefferies had read the book (John Pearson, PhD thesis, Exeter University), and there is a further mention of White in his letter to Bentley of 17 June [1886] (D20.3v). However, these allusions are consistent with Jefferies' having known the book well by reputation (he would have found it mentioned often enough in reviews of his books), but without ever having seen or closely examined it. In the preface he confirms: 'I did not come across Mr. White's book till late in the day, when it was, in fact, too late, else this Calendar would have been of the utmost advantage to me'. He may well have had in mind here that the thought had occurred to him independently of compiling a nature calendar, indeed it is an obvious one to have arisen from his notebook records year by year of the first appearances of plants, birds, etc. There are entries in the notebooks of May 1878 and October 1879 which hint at such a project (see B17 Introduction), and the same idea was proposed, again it would seem independently of White's calendar, by Longman in 1886. Jefferies wrote in May of that year: 'Your suggestion of a diary out of doors would no doubt make a good book, and I shall give serious thought to it' (E2.1, p.331). The idea was congenial, but in August he is even less certain of being able to realize it: 'I should have liked to have written the book you proposed. I made several attempts but it never satisfied me... Even yet, perhaps, I may do something in that direction' (E2.1, p.332). And when he wrote the preface the following year

his 'too late' is perhaps a tacit recognition that he did not have the strength or time left to carry it out. Rhys's first letter to Jefferies is dated 3 January 1887:

I have been wanting for some time to try and secure your good services for a vol. of White's *Selborne* in this series. [The letter has 'Camelot Classics' at the head.] Ever since a certain beneficent uncle of mine, of rustic tastes, put *The Gamekeeper at Home* into my hands in my later boyhood, your books and essays have had a continued influence upon me, and now that I find myself, somewhat unaccountably, the editor of a series of books, it is in the simple nature of things that I should turn to you in this matter. Perhaps you have already seen some of the vols that have been issued in the series, and so will have an idea of what our requirements are approximately. In this case they would be quite simple, - merely a little introductory dissertation on Gilbert White and his delightful book, which need not be more than four or five pages; and indeed, as you will understand, the publishers are not able to pay for much original matter in so cheap an edition. Will you then kindly let me know what you think of the proposal, and what terms you require? I may add that I should like to issue the volume this spring if possible.

I asked my friend Mr. Sharp for your address but as he is uncertain whether Savernake still holds good, I address this c/o your publisher [Chatto and Windus]. (D29.2iv)

William Sharp, who also wrote as 'Fiona Macleod', was himself involved in some editing of the first Camelot volumes. The extent of his acquaintance with Jefferies is not known, but Jefferies had written to him on 26 August 1884 (when he had in fact left Savernake in Brighton and was in Eltham) praising his book of verse on Australian landscape and nature *Earth's Voices*, published that year (D41. Hi). Later Sharp sent him Whitman's *Specimen Days* as a token of esteem, and in June 1887 in a letter to Rhys (or so Thomas implies) he wrote: 'Why does not Mr. Sharp send me *Leaves of Grass* as a companion to *Specimen Days*?' (E23.1,p.313)

Rhys's next letter of 18 January refers to a reply sent by Jefferies on the 6th:

I am very glad you will undertake the Intro, to White's *Selborne*. I have asked the publishers to send you a copy of Landor's *Imaginary Conversations*, one of this series, so that you can form an idea of what we have usually done on our other vols. I should like to make *Selborne* our May vol. (pubn. really on April 25th) in this case perhaps you could let us have your MS by the end of February? (D26.1ii)

A further paragraph mentions Sharp again, who has been ill with scarlet fever, and Rhys fears is overworking. Jefferies' misgivings about the undertaking, after receiving *Imaginary Conversations* (the third in the series, edited by Have-lock Ellis), are apparent from Rhys's letter of 7 February:

All last week I was so unwell that even letter-writing was out of the question, or I should of course have replied to yours of 29th ult. at once. It was in some respects a mistake to send you the Landor vol. as an example of the series. I did not at all intend it as an exact indication but only wanted to give a general idea of what our vols were like, as to type, get-up [or 'set-up'] and so on. As for the introductions they vary considerably in the different vols. That in the Landor was exceptionally long, as Landor was an author new to the wider popular audience that we have to do with. It is different with White's *Selborne*; and as we really cannot afford to have the book altogether overhauled and brought scientifically down to date in notes etc., it remains to have a simple preface of 4 or 5 pages. This, I shall be very grateful if you will reconsider your doubts in the matter, and undertake. I shall be glad to wait for as long as you like, though I find it very hard to think that ailment can be the cause of delay to you whom, of all men, I feel, sun and wind and strength of earth and sea should conspire to keep in perfect health. (D26.1iii)

Thomas, who knew Rhys and had doubtless seen Jefferies' side of the correspondence, mentions a letter of February in which Jefferies describes himself as 'a perfect invalid' (E23.1, p.313), but it seems from Rhys's introductory remarks quoted above that he had no idea at the time, from any such intimations, of the seriousness of Jefferies' condition. Some further persuasion and encouragement must have been necessary to bring Jefferies back to a willingness to write the preface - in tragic contrast to his earlier fluency and fecundity - as the

next letter of 13 April shows that it has only just been begun. This is the one letter of the sequence we have from Jefferies, addressed from Sea View, Goring, and written in his own hand:

The preface is started but has made sorrowfully little way this cold weather. If you are obliged to choose between the Antiquities and the Calendar I should recommend the Calendar as interesting to everybody and understood by all. About Marwick's notes select those that explain points where White's observations had not been complete - as about the willow wren - half of Marwick's notes would suffice; re-write it yourself as a footnote if pressed for space. The Calendar is a very important part of the book. If the weather will but let me use my Bath chair I should hope to make progress very soon. (E50.1, pp.22-3: transcript and facsimile)

We are reminded that Jefferies had told C.P. Scott in a letter of 2 February that the cold weather prevented him from working by keeping him inside: 'With me the power to write is almost entirely dependent on being out of doors. Confined indoors I have nothing to write, and cannot express my ideas.' (E2.1, p.351) Looker and Porteous say that the preface was dictated, but there seems to be nothing to confirm this, and from the months spent on it he may indeed have written it out slowly in his own hand. He was clearly content to leave the detailed editing of William Marwick's notes and supplementary observations to Rhys, who wrote on 30 April: 'In accordance with your last letter I have decided to leave out the Antiquities and make up the volume with the Calendar and the Observations, cutting down Marwick here and there as you suggest' (D26.1iv). This letter, in which he goes on to talk pleasantly of the weather and rebuilding of Battersea Bridge, is the last we have in the correspondence, but it was not until June, according to Thomas, that the preface was finished and sent. The publisher must have moved swiftly then as the book, which came out as the July volume in The Camelot Series, was in print by June 23rd.

We have no record of how much Jefferies was paid for the preface - Rhys's references to the finances of publication suggest the amount would have been small. But he was doubtless sympathetic to the series as a publishing venture. He had been indebted to Bohn's Library in his youth, and the Camelot volumes were exactly the unabridged 1/- reprints of the best authors that he advocated for the village reader in 'Country Literature' (B20).