



Nature's Philosopher

an appreciation
of the work of Richard Jefferies

BY PAUL HUMPHREYS

MANY YEARS AGO, when I was browsing in a bookshop, my attention was caught by the title *The Story of my Heart*, by Richard Jefferies. I had vaguely heard of Jefferies and, out of curiosity, I took the book down from the shelf and began to read. I became increasingly absorbed, for it seemed that I had found a kindred spirit. His unorthodox ideas concerning nature and mankind appealed to the young man I was then and I found them very exciting.

I bought the book for a small sum and I still have it – a stoutly-bound volume with a green cover decorated with a floral design in gold, and with attractive illustrations depicting country scenes at various seasons.

The Story of my Heart is a strange, in some respects a unique book. The sub-title, 'My Autobiography', is misleading, for it contains little about the external events of the author's life. Even Jefferies himself had difficulty in describing the book. In the summary he attempted for the original publisher he says that 'The general aim of the work is to free thought from every trammel, with a view of its entering upon another and larger series of ideas than those which have occupied the brain of man for so many centuries'.

The book was published by Longmans in 1883, but Jefferies explains that the seed had germinated seventeen years earlier, on Liddington Hill, on the Downs above Swindon and three miles from his home, where he was in the habit of going to be alone. There, lying on the thyme-scented grass, he 'spoke in his soul to the earth, the sun, the air and the distant sea far beyond sight'.

ONE DAY last summer my wife and I walked up Liddington Hill. If you could forget the combine harvester at work on the lower slope and two young soldiers on an exercise with a field transmitter set up on the highest point of the encampment at the top, the scene was much as Jefferies knew it. With the sun beating down from a cloudless blue sky it was easy to imagine him present in spirit, seeking through intense communion with the elements 'a reality beyond deity'.

The philosophy of *The Story of my Heart* is intensely idealistic and not always coherent; and Jefferies is over-fond of vague verbal constructions involving the soul – 'soul-life, soul-emotion'. But the book reveals a noble quality of mind and glows with a passion and sincerity that disarm criticism.

I acquired and read other books by Jefferies –

Wild Life in a Southern County, *The Game-keeper at Home* and *Bevis*, his still popular book for boys. He is an author I have returned to again and again and always with pleasure; reading him is like going on a country walk with the ideal companion.

RICHARD JEFFERIES was born at the hamlet of Coate near Swindon in 1848, the eldest son of James Luckett Jefferies, a smallholder, and his wife Elizabeth Gyde who came from London but whose family originated in Gloucestershire. At the age of four, for what reason is not clear, Richard was sent to live at Sydenham with his maternal aunt, Mrs Harrild. Jefferies's relationship with his parents seems to have been not altogether happy; his aunt proved more understanding and he confided in her and corresponded with her regularly.

When he was nine he returned home to Coate and attended schools in Swindon. He had already become an avid reader and, on leaving school, his thoughts turned to writing. He began by contributing articles to local papers and later joined the *North Wiltshire Herald* as a reporter.

Jefferies first became more widely known through a long letter he wrote to *The Times* on the condition of the farm labourers in Wiltshire. This was in 1872, when up in Warwickshire Joseph Arch was conducting the campaign that led to the forming of an Agricultural Workers' Union. It has been suggested that Jefferies failed to take advantage of this breakthrough. Instead he devoted himself to writing novels which brought him neither fame nor money.

In 1874 Jefferies married Jessie Baden of nearby Day House Farm. It is unlikely that the Baden family approved of the match; even during their courtship Jefferies was roughly handled by Jessie's hefty brothers. The tall, gawky figure of 'Moony Dick', as he was unkindly nicknamed, was a familiar sight in the fields and lanes round about, but it was not one that aroused feelings of sympathy, much less of respect in those who ran across him. Nor did Jefferies go out of his way to make himself more popular: he was unkempt in appearance, reserved in manner and solitary in his habits.

After their marriage the couple lived for a while at Coate Farm before moving to a house in Swindon. In 1875 their first child, Harold, was born. Two years later, as Jefferies began to have more success with his writing, they left Swindon for Surbiton near London, then a

quiet suburb on the fringe of open country. In 1882 Jefferies developed symptoms of a tubercular infection which, despite all treatment, grew steadily worse. There were several more moves, the final one to Goring-on-Sea in Sussex where Jefferies died in 1887.

He is buried in Broadwater cemetery, within a few yards of another great naturalist and writer, W. H. Hudson, who died in 1922. In his book *Nature in Downland* Hudson describes a curious experience he had when he visited Jefferies's last home and resting-place. He was making his way to the cemetery when, hearing footsteps on the gravel, he glanced up and 'there before me stood the man himself back on earth in the guise of a tramp'. It was the identical 'long, thoughtful suffering face, long straight nose, flowing brown beard and rather large full blue eyes'. Hudson was startled by the misery on the tramp's face and knew that he would continue to be haunted by it.

TOWARDS the end of his life Jefferies established himself as a naturalist and authority on rural affairs, but it was not until after his death that his merits as a writer were fully recognized. The first to appreciate them was the Victorian man-of-letters Sir Walter Besant, whose *Eulogy of Richard Jefferies* set the tone of much that was to follow. Gradually he became something of a cult with literary men of like mind: Edward Thomas, Henry Williamson and Reginald Arkell were among those who produced biographical studies or edited selections from his works. His most devoted and indefatigable admirer, the late Samuel J. Looker, spent years tracing manuscripts, collecting reminiscences of Jefferies and publishing the results of his researches.

A Richard Jefferies Society, centred in Swindon, was founded in 1950 to stimulate interest in him through lectures, discussions and other activities, and membership is growing steadily. The Society, in collaboration with the local authority, keeps a watchful eye on developments in the countryside around Coate. One development which has their full support is the establishment of a nature reserve on part of Coate Water, the reservoir which features in *Bevis* as 'The Inland Sea'.

Although it is now hemmed in by subtopian Swindon and the road it stands on is a busy dual carriage-way, Coate Farmhouse has survived more or less intact, and so too has Day House Farm, home of the Badens. The upstairs rooms at Coate now house a museum which Jefferies shares with Alfred Williams, the Wiltshire poet. Here are displayed manuscripts, photographs, first editions and the table at which Jefferies wrote. An appeal, sponsored by Sir John Betjeman and other well-known writers and broadcasters, has been launched to save the outbuildings at Coate thus preserving the farm as an entity.

BETWEEN Jefferies's early books such as *Wild Life in a Southern County* and *The Game-keeper at Home* and the later essays which appear in *The Life of the Fields and Field and Hedgerow*, there is a noticeable difference in style and approach. The former is the work of the keenly observant and informed reporter, straightforward and objective in treatment, whereas in the latter one is aware of a new dimension: the response to Nature is more thoughtful, the perception more profound.

There is, I think, a hint of this maturing
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outlook in an admission Jefferies makes in *The Amateur Poacher*, another early work. As a young man he often carried a gun on his walks. One day he had raised it to shoot a pheasant: 'My finger felt the trigger, and the least increase of pressure would have been fatal; but in the act I hesitated, dropped the barrel and watched the beautiful bird. That watching so often stayed the shot that at last it grew to be a habit.'

Watching did indeed grow to be a habit and the result is to be seen in the rich texture and minute accuracy of his descriptions. His observation is wonderfully acute: he remarks on 'the prismatic gleam' on the wings of a hovering dragon-fly, the wind ruffling the feathers of a sparrow's breast as the first indication of an approaching storm, the way a leaf falls to the ground 'as if let down by a cord of gossamer gently'. I like too his comment in *Meadow Thoughts* on the old milestone, half concealed by weeds, which he used to pass on one of his favourite walks: 'To London 79 Miles' it read, and Jefferies adds the thought 'The very inscription cut at the foot of the stone, since no one would be likely to want that information'.

Reading *The Pageant of Summer* or *The July Grass*, two of his most evocative pieces, one is left with an almost physical sense of being out of doors on a hot summer's day; and all the bleak stillness of mid-winter is conveyed in his *January in the Sussex Woods*.

Sometimes, it is true, Jefferies lapses into a sentimentality that jars on modern ears. But he was a man of sensibility and also a Victorian; and the Victorians were not ashamed of a little honest sentiment when the occasion warranted.

DURING his short life Richard Jefferies was never free from poverty; his second son died of meningitis; and towards the end he himself endured almost constant pain. But neither pain nor misfortune dulled his faculty for observation nor the brightness of his vision of the natural world and of that then peaceful, unspoiled rural England he loved so well.

In his last essay, dictated to his wife because he was unable to write, his thoughts return to Coate, his old village, and to the people he knew there as a boy – not that, as he admits, they ever showed him much friendliness. It was the news, brought by a visitor, of the death of an old labourer that sparked off his memories.

Jefferies reflects on the life of toil and frugality that was the lot of this tough old countryman. He remembers his cottage on a bank where the first spring violets grew, the large hearth in the living-room, the door always wide open in summer. He remembers other cottages in the hamlet and their occupants, the massive oaks, the footpaths, the scent of clover and bean fields, and a hatch on one of the streams where he used to watch pike and perch lurking in the water beneath.

'The sun shone there for a very long time,' he writes, 'and the water rippled and sang, and it always seemed to me that I could feel the rippling and the singing and the sparkling back through the centuries.'

But then he sadly recalls that when he tried to communicate to others who knew the place the joy it had given him, they had stared 'with stolid incredulity'. 