

A JEFFERIES CENTENARY MEMORY

[That Nature herself speaks to him who comes to her for instruction is known by those who have approached the Great Mother with quiet eye and understanding heart. Of these was the English naturalist-mystic Richard Jefferies (born in 1848, died in 1887). Of these too is the author of this word-sketch, E. J. Rogers, who has found in Nature, in the deep silence of the woods and in the spirit of the countryside, he writes us, the "base to man's life which enables him to see if he stands upright" and that which prompts him to seek self-identification with the Whole. He is a lover of ancient Indian thought and an ardent admirer of the man of whose centennial observance he writes here: "After much reading I have come to the conclusion that Richard Jefferies will one day be shown to be the greatest poet and the highest soul-light of our era, and one of the greatest propagators for a higher and fuller life for man since the Galileean tramp-poet; a man whose words were so sadly twisted and merged into an urban restatement of false State Religion." The quiet charm of the observance in 1948 of the Centenary of Jefferies' birth in his own boyhood environment, well described here by Mr. Rogers, seems singularly appropriate for the day of remembrance of a lover and interpreter of Nature of the quality of Jefferies.—ED.]

Twelve months ago a group of people met at Daye House Farm, near Coate Water, to celebrate the Centenary of Richard Jefferies. They gathered under the open Dutch barn on a wet, windy afternoon. They were mostly members of the Workers' Educational Association from neighbouring Swindon; others were residential country folk and sportsmen. Some literary people were present and I saw one man of genius. There was an interesting minority of young people who looked like students, but many were farmers who had walked across the fields. It was pleasing to see a gamekeeper there; Jefferies owed much to the keeper from Buredop. The white hair of one active old man of ninety-three, who had known Jefferies as a

young man, stirred occasionally in the rather rough summer wind, but sitting unobtrusively amongst the people was one who had a much closer knowledge, Mrs. Hargrave, Jefferies' daughter. Young and old, all sat around on straw-bales, including the central figure of the Mayor of Swindon, but the open farmyard, the fields beyond, and the swift assaults of the summer showers, quietly placed all in the background of nature's equality.

When the earnest voice of Mr. Looker read to us of the beauty of the raindrops, it was a happy coincidence that a passing shower made the puddles dance. The milkers passing to their thatched byre looked at the assembly with detached interest, a welcome contrast to

the self-satisfied stare of the townsmen, and the lowing from the byre afterwards and the clink of the full pails going to the dairy, was all sincere music to those who could spare a thought for one who dreaded an over-industrialised civilization.

After Mr. Looker had given half of his talk, a blackbird came and perched on the top of a tall electric cable pole, and sang as only a blackbird can for the rest of the afternoon. "No sound of voice or flute can equal the blackbird," wrote Jefferies, and we listened to the same slow notes that he had heard from another black-bird in these same surrounding fields in his youth. The air was still between the occasional gusts of wind, as it is when we have summer rain; not another bird sang. We expected the thrush, the stormcock, from his elm-top, but we had only the blackbird of Jefferies to provide a musical background to this talk in his commemoration. Hardy would have loved this scene.

Mr. Looker told us of Jefferies' love of nature, of his worship of beauty, and it was perhaps fitting for this open-air occasion that this facet of his far-ranging mind was given to us, but one felt that the impression of the speaker was that Jefferies was a "nature-lover" only. Many people on the half-circle of straw-bales had read Jefferies' books and knew that this had been but a stage in his development. Like Shakespeare, like Goethe, like all great thinkers, he had passed from the school of nature to the school of life.

Jefferies always described himself as a student of Nature and Life. He knew that the mere sight of nature was only pleasing. It is the ability to merge oneself into nature, to know its spirit and to become part of its spirit, that gives that inner clarity of vision, that rare intuition which enables man to see nature and life with the eye of genius. Many people today see through the mind's eye and their vision is that of the complex mass mind, the "paper" mind. Jefferies called this the "museum-mind," the product of "house-life"; he pleaded for the fertile imagination, for organic thought rather than pedantic scholarship. His thoughts were nurtured in the green field, not in the dusty library. He chose for his symbol the green leaf and you will find this imprinted on the fly-leaf of his books. Jefferies knew that a wider vision must come to a future generation, and a wider development of the human mind through nature.

In his *Story of My Heart*, a unique and precious book that has in it the power of the unfolding bud, Jefferies developed this message, but left us—"to give the meaning to the words"—and it is our duty to attempt this.

Theocracy has labelled this mind-searching, "mysticism," and has always intimated that unless it is canonized it is unhealthy, but all great men and all great thinkers have known this inner consciousness and the development of the intuition from it, but none so intensely as

Jefferies, and he never let it lead him into phantasy. He was more akin to the old Vedanta thinkers whose pure thought enabled them to see with understanding. The Greeks knew this inner consciousness and it seems as if this rare knowledge has grown from its early Vedanta root and travelled through them to the Northern nations. Jefferies repeatedly referred to his country as "our northern nation."

The fusion of ideas always finds expression in one great poet. Jefferies has restated the thesis of this higher thought conception of future man, and its development through nature by a society that is forced to live in a metropolitan civilization. He tried desperately to interpret fully this spiritual resurgence. His ideas, however, were not recognized by his age; they are not recognized by ours, but one day they will be the Lyra prayer of a more enlightened era. Jefferies called this widening of the human mind "a fourth idea," and his conception of it and the mental directions he left for its manifestation constitute the significance of this prose-poet and his immortality.

These thoughts came to me as I sat in the half-circle of straw-bales and breathed the warm air that arose from the golden stalks, and I know that similar ideas came to others in the group who knew that Jefferies' stature was far greater than that of a mere "nature-lover." He was rep-

resentative of the spirit of England, a white light shining in our darkness. As I looked from the farm-yard to the mist hiding the head of Liddington, I thought of the mist that will one day blow clear from the old dogmatic ideas, the dead branches of thought, and I saw in imagination the future generations climbing the hill to pay simple homage to the genius of the Wiltshire farmer's son, to view the wide landscape of the surrounding countryside and to glimpse a wider horizon of the human mind. I saw the young people not only of England but also of Europe, and, in a distant future, of the world.

Turning towards the gathering under the Dutch barn, I thought of Jefferies' generation and of the old England he knew, and particularly when we all sat down to tea in the straw amongst the farm implements, because a natural and friendly spirit seemed to sing of this. The bourgeois drawing-room became a hollow joke. When the farmer's wife, a sound woman, brought us out a cake of historic proportions, the strength of another age shone from the brown crust and we knew Jefferies was with us in spirit. Afterwards as we left the farmyard and walked along the lane by the sarsen stones, which Jefferies was the first to notice, and through the elm avenue to Coate, we knew that this would be an afternoon not easily forgotten.

E. J. ROGERS