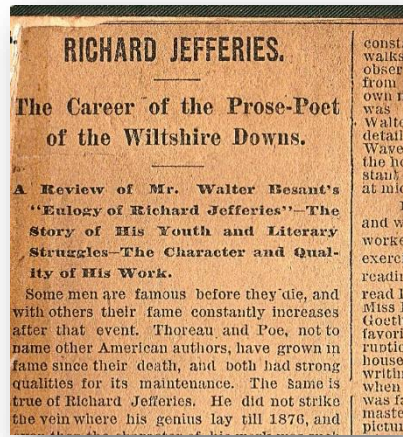




US newspaper cutting review of Walter Besant's 1888 Richard Jefferies biography
The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies, found pasted inside a copy of Jefferies' first US edition of
The Story of My Heart, published by Robert Brothers, Boston, USA 1883.

It illustrates the respect for Jefferies in the US at that time.

Transcribed with footnotes by RD Stapleford 4/2026.

RICHARD JEFFERIES.

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The Career of the Prose-Poet of the Wiltshire Downs.

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A Review¹ of Mr. Walter Besant's 'Eulogy of Richard Jefferies'²—The Story of His Youth and Literary Struggles—The Character and Qualities of His Work.

Some men are famous before they die, and with others their fame constantly increases after that event. [Henry David] Thoreau and [Edgar Allan] Poe, not to name other American authors, have grown in fame since their death, and both had strong qualities for its maintenance. The same is true of Richard Jefferies. He did not strike the vein where his genius lay till 1876, and even then the character of his work was such that a strong and exclusive rather than a broad and general reputation was gained. He succeeded in only one line, but there he is master. He has been

¹ Mention is made of a sole US review of 'The Eulogy...' in *The Nation* newspaper (New York), 13 December (implied, 1888), by George Miller and Hugoe Matthews, in their *Richard Jefferies: a Bibliographical Study*, Scholar Press 1993, ref. E2.1, p.749. The cutting of which these pages are a transcription, does not bear a citation but it might be reasonable to assume that it is that of *The Nation*.

² This, the original biography of Jefferies was published in the UK by Chatto and Windus and in the US (New York) by Longmans, Green and Co., each 1888.

called the English Thoreau, and there is much in his work that resembles Thoreau's, but it is also widely different from that of Thoreau. The latter was a man who, to a certain extent, interested himself in life and literature. Jefferies cared little for books, was not interested in his kind, placed no value on public affairs, had his single gift, floundered about through interminable efforts to do what nature had forbidden him to do, and finally discovered his talent and set about to increase it. Mr. Walter Besant has written his life with such enjoyment at finding a man of genius in the 'poet of the Wiltshire downs' that he calls the production a eulogy, and yet one does not feel that more is said than is proper or can be justified by what Jefferies has written.

The facts in his career are not numerous, but they are important in the determination of what is characteristic of the man. He was born at Coate farmhouse in Wiltshire on Nov. 6, 1848, and grew up with such intimate knowledge of every tree, every hedge, every inch of ground within a 10-mile radius, that his writings are a living photograph of what may be seen on these downs every day in the year. He was a curious and inquiring boy, and knew how to catch the feel of the country atmosphere. He was the second of five children, and owed much of his education to his grandfather, who

Is Happily Sketched

in one of his books³ as old Iden. When still a child of 4 years, he went to live with an aunt at Sydenham, coming home for a month every summer. He had a highly nervous and sensitive temperament, was hasty and quick-tempered, impulsive and very reserved. At the age of 9 he went home for good. Here he began to read, and his memory was such that he never forgot anything that had interested him. He read everything, all the books his grandfather had, all he could borrow from the neighboring farms, but when he went out with his grandfather into the fields and began to turn over the pages of nature, he read here even with more distinctness than he followed the printed page. He never forgot Coate farm, and it is imperishably preserved in his writings. He never forgot anything that nature revealed to him. He saw every tree, every hill, every patch of wild thyme, and when he came to write about the 'Wild Life in a Southern County', the pictures of what he had seen rose up to his imagination with the distinction of a fresh revelation. His life was in his outwardness. Like Gilbert White and Thoreau he must be by himself; not with men, but with the trees, with the sun burning his cheek, within reach of the fragrant wild flowers, and where he could hear the call and the cry of the birds. No one before him so lived in the fields, or heard so distinctly the song of the flowers, the weeds and the blades of grass.

³ *Amaryllis at the Fair*

Almost the only adventures of his life came in his 16th year. He wanted to visit foreign countries, and with another lad he undertook to walk through the whole of Europe, as far as Moscow and back again. They actually went to France where they stayed a week, and then returned home and planned to take a Liverpool steamer for America. They had no money for the voyage, and with difficulty were returned home. Now he had some encouragement given him in the farmhouse. He had an upper room where he could be alone with books, table, desk and bed. Here he could read 'Faust', of which he never tired, and his aspirations gradually led to his

Becoming a Reporter

for the local press. A local editor gave him a chance, and printed his sketches and descriptive papers. He acquired shorthand. He showed considerable power in pen and ink sketches. All this while the habit of solitude and reserve increased upon him. His appearance was peculiar. He was 6 feet in height. His hair was dark brown, his beard was brown, with a shade of auburn, his forehead was both high and broad, his features strongly marked, his nose long, clear and straight, his lower lip thick, his eyebrows distinguished by the meditative droop, his complexion fair, with very little colour, the most remarkable feature in his face being his large and clear blue eye. His face was full of thought. He walked with noiseless tread and rapid stride. He never carried an umbrella. He had great powers of endurance in walking. He made few friends. He was not a clubbable man. He never sought society. He was never a journalist except in his connection with the Swindon local paper. It was not the life that suited him.

The literary growth of this young man is faithfully and lovingly traced by Mr. Besant. He has been taken from school too soon. He is trying to make good sentences. He twists a phrase this way and that so that he may acquire variety of expression. He is beginning to write novels that are good for nothing, because he has not insight into human life. He goes to France to see the prince imperial. He obtains a glimpse of the Franco-German war. He returns home to Coate farm. He is terribly poor. He has but 2s. 3d. in his pocket. He is threatened with imprisonment because he cannot pay £2 10s. He consults Mr. Disraeli⁴ about his literary work. He aims to become the great novelist of the day, but publisher after publisher declines his manuscripts, and he is at a loss how to proceed. This sort of experience is his portion till the year 1873. For eight years he was experimenting, but not advancing in the way of success. All the while his

True Vocation Was Open

⁴ Benjamin Disraeli was UK Prime Minister 1868 and 1874-80. Jefferies wrote to him on 12 July 1871 prompted by the publication of Disraeli's novel *Lothair*, 1870, and received a handwritten reply.

before him and unconsciously followed. The first installment of success came in the form of a letter to the editor of the Times on relations of the farmer with the agricultural laborer. This enabled him at one bound to spring into an authority on things agricultural, but the visionary novelist was still following his notions rather than the lines of success that lay plainly before him. This was the first time that he struck on his feet, but he had such an idea of what he could do as a writer of stories that he could not believe that so trivial a thing as a newspaper letter outlined his future career. It was not for three or four years more of his short life that he was to find his true vocation. He was in his 22d year, and yet, except the Times letter, he had done nothing worth speaking of. In July 1874, after three years' engagement, with his fortune secretly improved, he was married. In less than a year his first child was born. He was now nearly through his efforts at fiction, and was beginning to write for the periodicals some of the papers which clearly indicate where his strength lay, but it was not till 1876 that he fairly entered upon his true career of authorship. Even then he was ready to turn aside from his true field on the merest provocation. He was impressed that he must go to London, if he was to win literary success. He could not see that in the growing importance of the agricultural laborer he had a field of great magnitude where his knowledge could be of special service to the country. He was still to dance attendance for a while on London publishers till 'The Gamekeeper at Home' was in print in 1878. It was largely the increasing praise that came to him from the readers of this book that opened to him a broader field. Jefferies could never have written his best things but for this praise. He needed the incentive of appreciation to do his good work. His other books appeared in quick succession. They were, the chief of them, 'Wild Life in a Southern County', 'The Amateur Poacher', 'Green Fern Farm' [sic.] and 'Round About a Great Estate'. None of these appealed to a wide class of readers, but all of them, even if in the same vein,

Did Not Lack for Interest

to the lovers of nature. There is that in the writings of all naturalists and students of country life which greatly stimulates one, and, much as they write on their great theme, there is never repetition or weariness to those who are interested in the subject. Gilbert White, old Isaak Walton, Henry Thoreau and Dr. C. C. Abbott never tire with their details, because they are always fresh and delightful in their observation of the life of the out-door world. The same quality is found in the books of Jefferies. It seems at first that the repetition is endless, but, though the presence of the human is wanting, the study of the birds, the trees, the hedges, the landscape, the sky, the light and shade, the whole face of nature, is so faithful, so minute and so exceptional, that the writings are a constant surprise. Mr. Besant makes the paper called 'The Pageant of Summer' as the highest note that Jefferies ever reached, but single paragraphs all through his books are in the

same poetical and enthusiastic vein. Mr. Besant says: 'I do not suppose that his work will ever be widely popular, and yet I am certain that his reputation will grow and increase. Of all modern writers, I know of none whom one can predict with such absolute certainty that he will live. He will surely live. He draws, as no other writer has done, the actual life of rural England under Queen Victoria. For the very fidelity of these pictures alone he must live. No other writers except Jefferies and Thomas Hardy, have been able to depict this life.'⁵

The habits of work with Jefferies were such that he could not fail to be master of this field which he chose to cultivate. He constantly made notes of what he saw in his walks. All his writing is the fruit of close observation. He could not take anything from others. All his coin was from his own mint. His note books indicate that he was as careful of little points as was Sir Walter Scott in maintaining the accuracy of details in the historical allusions in the Waverly novels. He could never stay long in the house at any time. He was a very constant walker. His only substantial meal was at midday.

He Liked a Good Roast Joint

and wished an abundance of vegetables. He worked about five hours a day, took three for exercise, and spent the rest in resting and reading. He had few books. He could not read Dickens, but the writings of Ouida [Maria Louise Ramé] and Miss Braddon he enjoyed. He never tired of Goethe's 'Faust', and old ballads were a favorite with him. He could not bear interruption while engaged in writing, and the house had to be quiet. Most of his later writing, and much of his best, was produced when he was suffering great bodily pain and was far from well. He wrote to maintain the mastery over his sufferings. Exquisite as his pictures of wild life are, he is not a writer whom you can read rapidly. Unlike Thomas Hardy, there is no humor in him. He is always as grave as an owl, and most of his writing is in a minor and pathetic key. His details detain you, and it is in these details that the richness of his work abides. The exquisite 'Pageant of Summer' was written while he was suffering from poverty and had the prospect of death before him, but this did not mar the fidelity of his delineations nor the beauty of his expressions. His touch grew more and more incomparable as time went on. His sentences were perfect, and his style had the rhythm and flow of the language of the poet. In 1883 Jefferies wrote a book that is professedly autobiographical. It was called 'The Story of My Heart'. It is now out of print,⁶ but it is the work of

⁵ *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies*, Walter Besant, chap. VII, *In Full Career*, p.186, Chatto & Windus 1888.

⁶ With the original UK Longmans and US Roberts Brothers respective first editions of 1883's 'The Story of My Heart' no longer available, and following Jefferies' passing in 1887, one can imagine that the work evoked a sense of mystique. Hence, Longmans second edition of 1891 saw an uplift in sales and with numerous editions published in the decades since.

all others into which Jefferies poured his thoughts and convictions. He was not a thinker, but he had his own way of treating the questions that came to him. Many literary men have a religion of their own. [Ralph Waldo] Emerson had his; Thoreau was faithful to the church of one member; Jefferies worked out to that point where the common religious creeds had no more effect upon him than the pouring of water on a duck's back. Comparing the two men, Mr. Besant says: 'Both men were of few wants and simple habits. Neither went to church, yet in the heart of each there was a profound sense of religion, which, in the case of Jefferies, took the form of a firm faith in the future destiny of the soul. Both men were impatient of authority and imitation. Each desired to be self-sufficient.

'What Emerson Says of Thoreau

'in respect of open air and exercise might have been written of Jefferies: "The length of his walk uniformly made the length of his writing. If shut up in the house he could not write at all."⁷ In both men there was to be observed a great strength of common sense.'⁸ Again, he says: 'Though Thoreau was short of stature, and Jefferies tall, there is something similar in their faces; the lofty forehead; the full, serious eye; the large nose—these features were common to both. And to both was common—but Jefferies had, perhaps, the greater forbearance—a certain impatience with the common herd of mankind who knew not and care not for Nature.'⁹ How this man laid himself down on the bosom of the world and drank in its spirit is feelingly expressed in the following passage from 'The Story of My Heart'. 'I used to lie down in solitary corners at full length on my back, so as to feel the embrace of the earth. The grass stood high above me, and the shadows of the tree branches danced on my face. I looked up at the sky with half-closed eyes to bear the dazzling light. Bees buzzed over, sometimes a butterfly passed, there was a hum in the air, greenfinches sang in the hedge. Gradually entering into the intense life of the summer days—a life which burned around as if every grass blade and leaf were a torch—I came to feel the long-drawn life of the earth back into the dimmest past, while the sun of the moment was warm on me. This sunlight linked me through the ages to that past consciousness.'¹⁰ Again, he breaks out in language that the Greek gods might have uttered. '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

⁷ Source uncited by Besant.

⁸ *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies*, Walter Besant, chap. IX, *The Country Life*, pp.221-2, Chatto & Windus 1888.

⁹ *Ibid.* pp.223-4.

¹⁰ *The Story of My Heart*, chap. I, para.12.

at the rim of the earth and blue in deeper ocean. I desired to have its strength, its mystery and glory.’¹¹ The man that can see and feel this

Has the Soul of Wordsworth

and is ripe for immortality. He has caught the vision of that immortal sea that brought us hither. He has lived into the highest meaning that nature has to unfold to him.

The conclusion of this openly earthly existence was not far off when ‘The Story of My Heart’ was written. Jefferies fell ill December, 1881, five years and a half before the end. He was attacked by a disease that baffled the surgeons and disabled him from work. He suffered intensely, and yet, much of his very best work, the writing like ‘The Pageant of Summer’, by which he will live in literature, was actually done while he was in this suffering. During this time the slender sayings which he had been able to lay by became exhausted. He moved about from place to place, seeking to better his physical condition, without success. His fame had been extended to the United States, New Zealand and the islands of the Pacific, and letters of praise from these distant parts of the world found him writhing in agony. In his last days he wrote: ‘My wearied and exhausted system constantly craves rest. My brain is always asking for rest, I never sleep. I have not slept now for five years properly, always waking, with broken bits of sleep and restlessness, and in the morning I get up more weary than I went to bed.’¹² This is the language of a man who has done his work, and whose life is rapidly ending. A friend writes thus of the end: ‘One thing I saw in one of his last note books: “Three great giants are against me—disease, despair and poverty”. One thing more. His wife said that their time had been for a long time spent in prayer together and reading St. Luke. Almost his last intelligible words were: ‘Yes, yes; that is so. Help, Lord, for Jesus’ sake. Darling, good-bye, God bless you and the children, and save you all from such great pain’.¹³ He died at Goring Aug. 14, 1887. His family were left in absolute poverty. ‘In the gentlest, sweet, soft, sunny rain he was borne along the path to his grave in the grass’,¹⁴ and when the service had ended the large tears from heaven mingled with genuine tears of humans who felt that one of the truest poets of nature had ended his earthly career.

‘The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies’.

By Walter Besant,

New York, Longmans & Co., 15 East Sixteenth street.

12mo., pp.392.

¹¹ *The Story of My Heart*, chap. I, para.4.

¹² *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies*, Walter Besant, chap. XII, *Conclusion*, p.349, Chatto & Windus 1888.

¹³ *Ibid*, penultimate page 364, quoting the personal testimony of Jefferies’ friend, artist / illustrator John ‘J.W.’ North.

¹⁴ *Ibid*.