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See T1A. 18

Richard Jefferies and Sussex

By A. H. ANDERSON

FIFTY years ago this month—on 14th August, 1887—Richard Jefferies died at "Seaview," Goring, Sussex.

Of outstanding nineteenth-century writers, Richard Jefferies is one whose work was much associated with Sussex. Estimates as to the quality, meaning, and ultimate position of his work have varied considerably. By some he is regarded as a genius; by others as a man who, in some flights of imagination, lost himself in the mystical and transcendental.

But though there has been dispute as to what parts of his work rank highest, and will live longest, competent judges agree that some, at all events, of his work will live to become classic.

Sussex rightly takes pride in numbering Jefferies among the most celebrated residents in, and writers about, the county. Except for a period in 1884-5 he spent the last five years of his life here. During that period he published books in which were contained some of the writings judged to be among his finest accomplishments. He died in the county and in the county found his last resting-place.

In the fifty years since Jefferies' death much has been made, naturally enough, of the Jefferies associations with the county. Not all of the writers have been careful to verify their statements. Some of them chatter about him as they do about anything that seems likely to interest general readers, and some of these gossiping writers clearly cannot have read his works. But even the more careful writers have sometimes been misled.

It seems to be a task not unfitting the marking of the fiftieth anniversary of Jefferies' death, to state the facts and the limits of Jefferies' actual connection with Sussex—not so much of what he did write and publish while in the county, but what particularly

in his work does actually embody his experiences here. How much, in fact, did he owe to Sussex and how much did he repay by enshrining memories of the county in the writings which showed his highest qualities. Sussex has every right to be proud of the Jefferies' associations, but nothing to gain by the propagation or perpetuation of claims which cannot be maintained.

Probably the first writers (other than Sir Walter Besant and H. S. Salt in their biographical and critical lives) to link Jefferies with Sussex were W. H. Hudson and Boys Firmin. Hudson, in *Nature in Downland*, published in 1900, was satisfied that had Jefferies lived, his "splendid powers, always progressive until the last day of his life, would have been powerfully attracted by the county." Indeed, he believed that Jefferies would eventually have written a book about the Downs and the maritime district of Sussex, perhaps better than any work we had from him. Hudson's tentative and limited suggestion that *The Story of my Heart* was powerfully influenced by Sussex hardly justifies the superstructure of assertion that has since been built upon this foundation.

Boys Firmin's charming little guidebook to Crowborough appeared in the same year. That edition contained brief but interesting facts concerning Jefferies' life in the Crowborough district, and in a later edition (1905) he gives a list of essays which were written at Crowborough. There is no need to question the accuracy of this list. It was evidently made from a sympathetic knowledge and understanding of the facts. Firmin did, however, make one mistake which has probably misled many pilgrims. He said that Jefferies was buried in Broadwater churchyard, whereas he was buried in the Broadwater cemetery, a mile or so away. For this he may be for-

given, but one cannot feel as lenient to other writers who have copied his statement without verification and have sent people astray because they did not take the trouble to learn the facts.

Perhaps the first Sussex writer to give a list of such essays as contain beautiful and sympathetic descriptions of Sussex was Mr E. V. Lucas in his *Highways and Byways in Sussex*. The list appears on page 78. Mr Lucas is far too careful to allow himself to be caught napping in matters of this kind, and the list may be accepted with all confidence as far as it goes, with the reservations (a) that the influence of

Sussex is to be seen in other writings of Jefferies than these, and (b) that though he is obviously correct in including "January in the Sussex Woods" (since the title is Jefferies' own) it is in fact difficult to trace anything of Sussex in that essay, except the name in its title.

Without further preliminaries it is fitting now to set out the facts.

First, then, as to the actual connections of Jefferies with Sussex. That he knew parts of Sussex before coming to live in it is clear from the statements of his biographers. Both Sir Walter Besant in *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies* and Edward Thomas in his *Richard Jefferies, his Life and Work*, tell how he made holiday visits to Eastbourne, Worthing, Bexhill, Brighton, Lewes and Hastings. Except in a very general way, and with two possible important exceptions, it is doubtful whether any of these temporary visits made such impression upon him as to be reflected in his writings. In fact, I can find nothing that justifies a suggestion that they affected his work, unless it be that occasional visits



The House at Crowborough in which Richard Jefferies lived

to Beachy Head may have helped to build up a mental picture and the framework of thought represented by his essay "The Breeze on Beachy Head" in *Nature near London*. Certainly in the "Hours of Spring" in *Field and Hedgerow* he refers to previous climbs up Beachy Head—"I walked daily up the noble hill that leads to Beachy Head from Eastbourne joying greatly in the sun and wind"—but an examination of the Beachy Head essay will show that there is in it no such foundation of facts as might not have been gained in a single day's walk.

His first settlement in the county was at Savernake, 8 (now 87) Lorna Road, Hove, where he was living by the end of December, 1882; but his stay there was of less than two years' duration, for by September, 1884, he had moved to Eltham in Kent. By June, 1885, he was back in Sussex, living for a short time at Jarvis Brook ("Rehoboth Villa"), where he was until September of that year, when he settled at "The Downs," Crowborough, and remained there until July, 1886, or perhaps later.

Mr J. H. Ilott, who has written a more recent guide to Crowborough than Mr Firmin's, says that he also stayed for a short time at Cook's Corner on the London road before settling at "The Downs." By December, 1886, he had moved to "Seaview," Goring, where he lived until his death on 14th August, 1887. His actual residence in the county, therefore, was of not much more than about four years.

Of his Sussex residences, the house—"The Downs"—at Crowborough is distinguished by a plaque on its walls with the years of his birth and death. Boys Firmin tells us that it was in the front room of "The Downs" that Jefferies wrote his last essay with his own hand. After that all his work was dictated to his wife. The essay was "Hours of Spring." This is the essay with those moving passages:

I wonder to myself how they can all get on without me—how they manage, bird and flower, without me to keep the calendar for them . . . Nature sets no value upon life, nor on the larks that sang years ago. The earth is all in all to me, but I am nothing to the earth: it is bitter to know this before you are dead . . . Never was such a worshipper of earth.

It was my intention, had circumstances permitted, to have revisited all the homes of Jefferies in Sussex. It has not been possible to do this, but I am indebted to Mr C. M. Green, of Goring-by-Sea,¹ for the information that the house which, when Jefferies lived there, was known as "Sea View" has now been renamed "Jefferies House." Notwithstanding the great development in this district, it does not appear that there have been any material structural alterations, and in appearance the house is probably much the same as it was fifty years ago. Moreover, the lower part of the garden (particularly the rockery—the heap of rough, loose stones, overgrown by creeping flowers) is exactly as it was in Jefferies' lifetime. It is still frequented by a snake, which recalls the fact

that Jefferies used to watch for one at the same spot in the garden. The summer house used by Jefferies is, however, now no longer there. It should be stated that the house is now in use as a private residence, and the courtesy of the present occupant in furnishing these facts does not, of course, warrant intrusion.

The Municipal authorities at Hove, have marked the house which Jefferies occupied in their town, in which so many of his books were prepared (this was one of his prolific periods), as the home of so distinguished a writer, by a stone plaque recording that:

RICHARD JEFFERIES

lived in this house, 1883-1884

Probably the place of pilgrimage most to be visited will be Jefferies' grave in Broadwater Cemetery in South Park Road, Worthing. It is marked by a marble cross set upon three steps sheltered by a Portugal laurel. The simple inscription is:

In ever loving memory of

JOHN RICHARD JEFFERIES

*who died at Goring, August 14th, 1887,
aged 38 years*

with these words inscribed round the enclosing base:

*To the honoured memory of the Prose
Poet of England's Fields and Woodlands*

One of his friends, as stated in Besant's *Eulogy* (page 359) said that Goring churchyard, in its then neglected condition, was a horror to Jefferies; that more than once he repeated the hope that he might not be laid there, and that he himself chose the place where his widow left him at Broadwater.

It does not seem necessary to give a list of all the books that were prepared for publication by Jefferies in Sussex or that were actually published while he was living in the county. For instance, *Red Deer* was written during the period of his Hove residence, but it is in a sense a technical book, and it deals entirely with Somerset. Nor does it seem necessary to mention such books as *The Dewy Morn*

¹ I am also grateful to the Rev. P. Leonard, Vicar of Jarvis Brook, and to the Librarians of the Public Libraries of Brighton, Hove and Worthing for various courtesies.—A.H.A.

or *After London*, both of which were published in the Hove years, because they have nothing whatever to do with Sussex. Moreover, any such list would be in some sense misleading, for two reasons. One is that the date of publication of his volume of essays is not necessarily related to the date or place of their writing, as they were first issued in magazines or newspapers before publication in book form. The other is that each such volume consisted of essays drawn both from his latest and his earlier experiences. Thus, Wiltshire, Surrey, London, Somerset, and Sussex might all be drawn upon in the subject-matter of a single volume. — I will deal instead with the only books in which it can be demonstrated that the influence of Jefferies' Sussex life is indisputably manifested.

First let us get out of the way one book which has frequently been claimed as of Sussex but which has not the slightest relation whatever to the county. It is *Wild Life in a Southern County*. Of this book Mr J. Lee Osborn in the *Homeland Handbook Worthing and its Surroundings*, in what is otherwise an interesting précis of Jefferies' life claims—and this may be the first occasion on which this claim was made—that Jefferies, in *Wild Life in a Southern County* (chap. II) is evidently referring to the "terraces near Cissbury." For this statement there is not only no foundation—Jefferies was clearly referring in chap. II to the neighbourhood of his Wiltshire home—but there is actually a passage in the course of that very chapter in which he makes clear that it cannot possibly refer



Richard Jefferies' Grave in Broadwater Cemetery

to the South Downs. It is the passage in which he speaks of passing on foot for some 25 miles across the hills he is describing and travelling southwards for the whole of a long summer day. This disposes of any possibility that he can be writing of the South Downs.

Another book for which a claim has been made that it was written in Sussex is *Amaryllis at the Fair*. Ten years ago it was stated in the *Sussex Daily News* that this was written by Jefferies at Worthing. This seemed not only unlikely but impossible. At the time I invited the contributor who made this statement to disclose the source of his information, but no proof has up to the present time

1880-81 suggests that it may have been written in Sussex.

4. *The Story of My Heart*. Because this was undoubtedly written at Brighton (Jefferies' letter of 22 June, 1883, to Mr C. J. Longman, his publisher, fixes this matter without question), various writers have been disposed to find it very largely descriptive of and greatly influenced by Sussex. Apart from Hudson's early tentative suggestion, Mr G. Thurston Hopkins and Mr R. Thurston Hopkins in their quite recent book *Literary Origins of Sussex*, say of this book that "the South Downs and Pevensey inspired much of the lyrical emotion of nature worship to be found in this exquisite essay." This is to place the claim much too high.

A careful analysis of the phraseology, and consideration of the fact that the book represents Jefferies' speculations over a period of seventeen years, makes it clear that its opening passages deal entirely with Wiltshire memories. The first identifiable mention of Sussex is on pages 34-36 (the Silver Library edition) where he records the fact that at Pevensey (in 1880) he was so struck by the marvel of existence as flung at him with "crushing force by the sea, the sun shining, the distant hills" that he wrote down one sentence. There is a bare possibility, however, that the aspiration which he calls the Lyra prayer (pages 28-30) may have been inspired by Beachy Head, since it came to him "in a deep hollow on the side of a great hill, a green concave opening to the sea," which may just conceivably have been Beachy Head visited at the same time as Pevensey.

From this point on there is not a reference that could possibly suggest Sussex, and there are innumerable references making clear that the natural inspiration is that of Wiltshire, up to page 83. From that point Surbiton, London and Wiltshire memories are drawn upon until at chapter 7 (page 120) he says "I live by the sea now"—the first allusion to Brighton. Up to this point references to

the sea and to the Downs have either been entirely generalised or are positively identifiable as older memories, and apart from the single reference to Brighton there is no specific association or identifiable inspiration of Sussex again until the very close of the book. On pages 200-201 he refers again to the Pevensey incident, and now (p. 200) in the closing passages says, "Still, on the hills and by the sea-shore, I seek and pray deeper than ever," so that references to the sea-shore, the sea, and the Downs in the last five pages of the book can be clearly fixed as at or near Brighton.

This is the sum total of the unquestionable Sussex incidents and influences recorded in this wonderful book, and in view of the suggestions so frequently made that the whole book was largely influenced by the county it seems proper to take advantage of this opportunity to recall the exact facts of the matter.

(5) *Field and Hedgerow*. There is no doubt as to the fact that the articles in this book represent Jefferies' latest work, that they were written in Sussex and were in the main inspired by Sussex. In her brief preface his widow says that they are her husband's latest essays. Mr Boys Firmin gave specific and interesting information (based on his local knowledge contemporaneous with Jefferies' residence at Crowborough) concerning the origin and associations of many of these essays. They consist, moreover, of exactly those papers which were catalogued in Besant's *Eulogy* as still unpublished, and some of them were actually first printed in magazines after Jefferies' death.

The whole of this book, then, is of great interest to the Sussex reader who, if he knows Ashdown Forest and the Crowborough district, can work out the identifications for himself. The following notes may, however, be helpful. "Hours of Spring" is the essay of which it was said by Boys Firmin that it was the last actually written with Jefferies' own hand and that it was composed at Crow-

been submitted of the truth of the statement.

The books we have to deal with, then, are the following, and so far as I know they are the only books of Jefferies in respect of which any claim for a recognizably Sussex influence can be maintained:

1. *Nature Near London* (published 1883). Only the last three essays are concerned with Sussex. They are: "To Brighton," "The Southdown Shepherd," and "The Breeze on Beachy Head." Of these his biographer, Edward Thomas, says that the last two were composed at Hove. I am disposed to think that "To Brighton" was composed before Jefferies went to Sussex to live, because it is an account of a journey to Brighton and a tramp to Ditchling Beacon after quitting the train at Hassocks Gate. With regard to "The Breeze on Beachy Head," there are certain points which lead me to wonder whether he may not have written it at least as early as 1880 on the occasion when, at Pevensey, he cast into form a first sentence for *The Story of My Heart*. The matter for the moment is one of opinion. It can only be settled positively by reference to the files of *The Standard* in which it was first printed.

2. *The Life of the Fields* (published in 1884). Edward Thomas says that most of this book was written at Brighton. It contains "The Pageant of Summer," which, by common consent, is perhaps the finest piece of Jefferies' poetic descriptive writing. It would be pleasant to be able to claim that it was inspired by Sussex, but there is not a scrap of evidence which allows us so to consider it, though there is no doubt that it was written at Brighton. "Meadow Thoughts" is an almost equally beautiful article, but this is also entirely based on his Wiltshire memories. "Clematis Lane" is palpably Sussex and the South Downs. It is difficult to fix it continuously to any particular part of the Downs, for whereas Wolstanbury is at one point suggested, Worthing or Sompting is suggested at another. (It is a fair inference to draw

from Mr Lucas's passage concerning this essay that he thinks it may refer to South Harting, but I cannot find any warrant for this.) "Nature near Brighton" takes a wider range than might be expected or thought from the title. Lancing Clump is mentioned, for instance, and the description then switches off without warning to a part of the county most probably reminiscent of Arundel and its park. "Sea, Sky and Down" is quite a composite picture, wholly consistent with descriptions of Brighton and the Downs adjoining, but the transitions from one part to another are not clear enough to make the exact parts of the landscape identifiable. "January in the Sussex Woods" is Sussex only in name, which would fix it necessarily as descriptive of Sussex. It is just possible that it may have been written before he lived in Sussex, in which case it would seem that it can only have been inspired by a temporary visit to the Arundel district.

3. *The Open Air*. The most haunting and poetic of the essays in this book is "Wild Flowers." This opens with the South Downs, deals at points with Hurstpierpoint, the house at Danny, Wolstanbury Hill, and with Arundel. The great bulk of the essay is based on Wiltshire memories, however, so that, though this is one we would gladly claim as inspired by Sussex, we can only say that there is just enough of Sussex to provide the text for the rest of the essay. "Sunny Brighton" needs no further mention than its title, and "The Bathing Season" is also wholly of Brighton. "The Pine Wood" might, because of a use of the county dialect, tempt the Sussex native to think that it was of Sussex, but this would be the only justification for regarding it as possibly written during the Sussex life. It is tempting to think of the essay "Downs" as being of Sussex. All that can be said is that it is a generalized description of chalk downs and that its memories may therefore be based either on Sussex or Wiltshire. Reference to the great snowstorm of

borough "in the little room fronting the road" in "The Downs." This is alike the most poetic in diction and spirit, and the most pathetic, essay in the book. "Winds of Heaven" is not one of those mentioned by Firmin, but it is identifiable at several points with places in the Crowborough district. "The Country Sunday" is associated by Firmin with Rotherfield. "The Countryside: Sussex," deals with Ashdown Forest scenes. "Swallow-time" helps to fix the dates of Jefferies' life at Crowborough. "Buckhurst Park" is self-explanatory, and there are many identifying passages which enable one to follow Jefferies' course. "Among the Nuts" may for various reasons be ascribed to the Crowborough district, but exact identifications are not possible unless the reference to the May garland can be identified by any Sussex resident as belonging to a particular village. "Walks in the Wheat Fields" is based on generalised memories, some of which are manifestly of Kent and Sussex. "Just Before Winter" is largely descriptive of Ashdown Forest, but there is nothing to identify "the village by the forest" referred to therein. The remaining essays are not of such importance in subject, or are not so closely identifiable as to be of topographical interest in this connection, except that it may be noted that "An English Deer Park" is not descriptive, as might be thought, of Buckhurst, but, like "My Old Village" is definitely based on memories of Wiltshire.

In this article I have made no attempt at a critical appraisal of Jefferies' work as a whole; I have assumed, rather, a definite interest taken by cultured Sussexians in Jefferies' work, as in parts, classic literature, and as connected with Sussex. In my identifications, if I have tended to be positive, and perhaps even provocative, I have no intention of being apologetic. A very careful, prolonged, and close study of Jefferies' works and his phraseology over many years leads me to the conviction that various unjustifiable claims have been made in respect of the Sussex

associations. I have, therefore, as the result of my general study of the subject, and a very careful analysis now again made of the phraseology and references of the pertinent books and articles, compiled this list in the hope that it may rank as a definite contribution towards accuracy in this matter. If I can be shown to be wrong at any point I shall be glad to receive correction. I have purposely refrained from attempting to deal at any length with what Jefferies may have merely written in Sussex, because this is a subject which could only be settled finally by reference to files of magazines and newspapers in which certain articles first appeared, a task which may perhaps be undertaken by some other student.

A LAMENT FOR BISHOPSTON

These peaceful Downs where, now, slow horses
plough,
And seagulls follow;
Where, here and there, big barns lie snug, and round
Them swoops the swallow;
Where sheep bells tinkle and the dog's deep bark
Sounds down the valley;
Where sows and piglings feed and calves in yard
Round the trough rally;
Where cattle wander munching tender grass,
And cowherds whistle;
Where wheat and oats and beans and barley grow,
And sometimes, too, a thistle!
Where lynchets from past ages breast the slope,
And rounded tumuli
That for three thousand years or more have stood
Beneath the sky;
Where now the children play in flowery mead
Or by the pool
And down the country road they run their cheery
Way to school;
Where all this happy peaceful life is lived
'Mid growing crops,
Will soon be villas packed in serried rows,
And streets, and shops!

M. E. CARPENTER.

ONLY

Only some fields of corn,
Some tall trees stretching high,
Only some white clouds moving
Slowly up in the sky.

Only the distant blue
Of the shimmering summer sea,
Only sunny Sussex
But ah, how dear to me!

M. A. GOWAN.