THE RICHARD JEFFERIES SOCIETY

"A LABOUR OF LOVE" by P.J. Kavanagh

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The description 'country writer' has always seemed to me very unhelpful when we are dealing with someone whose appeal, because of his quality, is wider than that. After all, the majority of readers live in towns and the phrase suggests a writer who brings them news of a distant, holiday world which they can sigh over for a minute or two, if they want to, before they turn back to the real business of urban living. Even today - especially today - that tag, 'country writer', can put a barrier between a writer and his audience.

I mention this because the rough similarity between the subject-matter of Edward Thomas and Richard Jefferies - which is to say hedgerows, old barns, country characters, and I repeat I speak roughly - makes it superficially natural that the younger man should respond to the work of the older one and, twenty years after Jefferies[1] death, which was in 1887, that he should write an appreciative book about him; two 'country writers.'

But their temperaments, I should guess, were nowhere near akin. The ecstacy and self-surrender of Richard Jefferies in The Story Of My Heart (that astonishing, and to some, embarrassingly intense, piece of spiritual autobiography) would be quite impossible for the sceptical and self-conscious Edward Thomas. Jefferies' views, especially the over-hearty, over-simple ones of his early writing, clearly irritated Thomas, even disgusted him, and he doesn't scruple in his biography to call his subject 'silly[1], 'crude', when he considers him to be so.

No, what fascinates me about the two men is not the apparent enthusiasm they shared for rural matter, but the odd parallels of their artistic developments. For when Thomas describes Jefferies' journey towards clarity, simplicity, mastery, part of the excitement we who love Thomas feel as we read this, comes from our knowledge that Thomas was to take the same path himself and arrive, as an artist, like Jefferies, only a few years before his own death.

Apart from the similarity of their careers there is another subterranean seam of interest in Thomas's book. It is true, of course, that we can learn from it something about Jefferies the man - though writing so near the time he

could risk no very startling personal revelations, if he knew any, and if he had wanted to: it is true we can learn a great deal about Jefferies[1] work, for the biography uses quotations so liberally, page after page of them, it almost represents an anthology, and could be used as such. But above all, we can learn, most revealingly, what one good writer - eventually a great one - considered to be the difference between good writer and bad, and between good writing and the best. I know of no other book where these differences are set out so clearly, with examples. Critics may tell us why one thing is better than another, and Thomas was a good critic. But when a writer, a poet, takes another, beloved poet to pieces and holds him up to the light - for Jefferies at the end, as Thomas says, was a poet - the result is likely to be of practical help, a look inside the workshop.

But before 1 quote some of Thomas's conclusions about the art of writing, and his use of Jefferies as exemplar of the best as well as, very nearly, the worst, it might be worth saying a few words about Thomas and the circumstances in which this book came to be written.

From a very early age, when he was only twenty-one, Thomas was tied to the treadmill of writing, fast, in order to feed his family. This induced such fatigue and frustration in him that sometimes he feared insanity. He worked as incredibly, almost insanely hard, that Norman Douglas, a contemporary, said of Thomas's life as a literary journalist that as for himself he would sooner have been blacking boots. Then suddenly encouraged by Robert Frost, in December 1914 - helped perhaps by the fact that literary commissions were harder to come by, and his world appeared to be breaking up anyway, he wrote his first poem. It seemed to come out whole, in a style not quite like anyone else's, and for the next two years he continued at a great rate, sometimes two poems a day, until the end of December 1916. The following February, he was in France, and two months later, he was dead, on Easter Monday. All his poems crammed between his thirty-sixth and his thirty-eighth year.

It is a wonderful story, a miraculous one, and the similarities with the story of Jefferies are clear to see. Jefferies, too, wrote to order, to please editors, and clearly wrote under pressure, at pace. Where Thomas was tortured by his melancholy and frustration, Jefferies was latterly tortured by his terrible illness, some kind of tuberculosis of the spine that sometimes made it impossible for him to walk, or even stand. Gradually the great last work of Jefferies began to come; two novels, The Dewy Morn and Amaryllis At The Fair, and the essays of the last few

years. In both men this final flowering came after a long, hard, hard-working apprenticeship.
Thomas wrote of the clarification and refinement of Jefferies' genius in 1907 when he himself was thirty years old. Was it possible he hoped the same might happen to him? I would like to think so, but I doubt it. Thomas's despair was almost wilful in its consistency, though I am sure he could not help it, and I'm sure he saw no light at the end of his tunnel. It is our pleasure to know that there was such a light though Thomas's sense of defeat in no way diminished his joy in the victory of Jefferies.

In fact, this biography was written, of all his books, in the most favourable circumstances. The subject was one he would have chosen himself and he was allowed, as far as I can discover uniquely, a whole year in which to write it. The result, in Q.D. Leavis' words, is 'a classic in critical biography, to stand with Lockhart's Scott and Mrs. Gaskell's Bronte.'

Richard Jefferies was born at Coate, then a small village near Swindon in Wiltshire, the son of a small and failing farmer, in 1848. His disinclination for farm work, his habit of wandering the lanes and fields alone, apparently abstracted earned him the local nickname of 'Loony Dick'. Nevertheless, no-one was working harder, at observation, at the reception of clear impressions of his native place, and so Thomas begin; his book, very properly, with a chapter called 'The Country of Richard Jefferies.' This will serve as an example of all Thomas's country descriptions, excellent at times and at others, to my taste, too flowery - sometimes literally too flowery, as in this sentence about Liddington Hill.

> 'As he (Richard Jefferies) took deep breaths of the air about its harebell, eyebright, clover, bedstraw, scabious and fine grass, his brain was burrowed and sown with the thoughts that ripened in The Story Of My Heart.'

As far as I am concerned a little of that goes a long way. Apart from such botanical litanies Thomas's prose, still, in 1907, contained some of the 'dead rhythms', the literary language unrooted in common speech, which he so detested and struggled so hard to get away from. In the end he <u>did</u> get away from them, but nature notes were what the public expected and here he is still

sometimes, though only sometimes, writing for a market that liked 'fine writing' and recognised it only in self-conscious rhythms and over-emphasis.
But even in his description of Jefferies[1] countryside he soon strikes the note that concerns us. Here he is talking of literary matters, even when describing the Wiltshire Down He says:

> 'Taken separately, the Downs have lines as fair as those of animals: the light wavers on their smoothe and, as it were, muscular sides as it does on the rippling haunches of a hors Yet they have a hugeness of undivided surface ... They bring into the mind the thought that beauty - whether of a poet's lines, or of a melody, or of a cloud, or of shining water -is the natural and inseparable companion to passionate, bold true-hearted acts and thoughts and emotions'.

'Passionate, bold, true-hearted acts and thoughts and emotions.' He is claiming for art the highest moral signif-icance. For Thomas is a moralist of course, as was Jefferies and as I believe is every great artist.
Thomas then goes on, in two separate chapters, to deal with Jefferies' ancestors and his boyhood, a careful and detailed job. He always gave his publishers full value for their money. Again, it is the critical asides that stand out. He describes how Jefferies saw the disinterment of a skeleton and how the sight haunted him. He adds:

> 'One sorrowful impression of this kind can furnish an acid by means of which even the joyous things bite deeper into the brain.'

How relevant that is to Thomas's own poetry, not yet written and not yet hoped for. He knows too well the gap between insight and expression however. He says: 'Jefferies early possessed such an eye, such an imagination, though not for many years could he reveal some of its images by means of words. In fact, he was very soon to bear witness to the pitiful truth that imagination does not supply the words that shall be its expression; he was to fill much paper with words that revealed almost nothing of his inner and little more of his outer life.'

Again, part of the excitement of that comes not only from its truth in application to Jefferies but its truth in application to Thomas. From now on he gets down to the work, beginning at the beginning, the stories published in the North Wilts Herald. He is no idolater. He describes them as having 'much facility and exuberance of trashiness.'

He is short about Jefferies' early political views as expressed in a pamphlet called 'Jack Brass, Emperor Of England.'

> 'It is a jaunty, humourously intended by-product of his Conservatism, which served its purpose, if it gave him as much satisfaction immediately as disgust later on.'

Of the first novels he writes pages, with pages of quotations -for like all good critics he never blames or praises without giving examples, so the reader can judge for himself. But he sums up his view of these in two cool sentences:

> 'His characters are persons with much leisure for passions ... He is trying to imagine the motives of people who give sovereigns to footmen.'

Oddly - or not all oddly, if we abandon the misleading term 'country writer[1] - it is the move to the suburbs of London that Thomas believes marks the beginning of Jefferies' maturity. Jefferies took a huge delight in London, seeing its vastness as an aspect of Nature herself. He said -

> 'I am very fond of what I may call a thickness of the people such as exists in London' and sometimes he used to go there for no purpose, simply to drift where the crowds took him. Thomas calls him "one of the great Londoners ... It is not the least of that city's praises that it was part of the culture that made Jefferies[1] mature work memorable.' He notes, above all, an increase of naturalness. This, he regards as the core of Jefferies[1] excellence. He says:
> 'The observation has fallen into place, and has made a real picture, where there is no detail impeding the whole, nor any struggle with dead words.

He might be talking of one of the best of his own poems. But even about the mature Jefferies, Thomas is cautious:

> 'His judgement ... was uncertain. He had, however, by the constant necessity of moulding language to fit a more and more subtle subject-matter, become the master - the still rather uncertain master - of an easy, delicate, often sweet and, without extravagance, luxuriant style. It was not, I think, developed by much conscious effort, but grew to his use like the handle of a walking stick.

Thomas goes on:

> 'He was now in the main a poet ... the old world of "Fear God, Honour the Pheasant and Damn the Rest" became dim to him. Something he may have lost but the neighbourhood of pheasants, at least, does little good. I knew a parish of 10,397 souls, of which ten thousand were pheasants and the rest human beings, so miserable - except 17 of them at the big house and the rectory - that they were not even worth shooting, or, as far as was known, eating.'

Of The Story Of My Heart about which he might have been expected to have reservations, he says much, all in praise. 'Its movement, its parallel to Shelley's "Be thou with me, impetuous one!" places it beyond criticism, far within the realms of joy.'

'The book is a poem, I had almost said a piece of music - prose has rarely reached such a length and yet retained this absolute, more than logical unity.[1] There are passages 'weak in themselves, which, do but strengthen the force of the whole by their testimony to the writer's honesty. A clever man would have erased them; but, then, a clever man would have rearranged the book and given it an appearance of reasonableness it could not long survive. It is by the tones and gestures of the writer, in his words and ideas and images, that he is to be understood, if he is to inspire where he cannot instruct...'

Still he yields no inch falsely to his idol - he admits, in another place, what has to be admitted. 'Something there was in him, perhaps, akin to his uncomfortable humour, which unconsciously repelled - something that creeps into his writings, particularly in the more emphatic parts, and gives us a twinge as at an unpleasant voice.[1]

Elsewhere Thomas says something interesting about humour, which is reminiscent of Yeats' contempt for the spirit of comedy. He says:

> 'It was not twisted inextricably into the strands of (Jefferies) nature, it was often invisible, and let us be thankful for it, that yet another man of genius has been denied this heaven-descended monkey as a lifelong inseparable companion.'

Of the last two marvellous novels of Jefferies - I mean The Dewy Morn and Amaryllis At the Fair - Thomas gives a full analysis, a huge quotation and their just desserts. At the

end of the Dewy Morn chapter, he pays Jefferies his greatest compliment.

> 'There are several places where the easy omission of a phrase or two would have cleared away an awkward fault. It is deftness only that is wanting, and Jefferies was never deft.'

That last phrase has stuck in my mind since I first read this book. Thomas is praising a writer for not being 'good' in the accepted sense, for not being good in the way that caused Thomas himself to be accepted, for in prose Thomas was deft in a way he refused to be in his poetry.

Of Amaryllis At the Fair he goes further. 'Mr. Hardy is far more dramatic, far more psychological and also far cleverer in effects, but he is seldom so right.[1]

He quotes a short passage from the essay 'Hours Of Spring[1] written by a man, not yet forty years old, who would not see another Spring, and after the quotation, Thomas rises to one of his highest flights of eloquence. I would like to end on his words. For he is defining and defending the kind of writer Jefferies was and, surely, in the process, defining the kind of writer he himself wanted to be, and the kind of writer he became, before the end. Here is the quotation from Jefferies:

> 'Nature has no arrangement, no plan, nothing judicious even. The walnut trees bring forth their tender buds, and the frost turns them - they have no mosaic of time to fit in, like a Roman tessellated pavement. Nature is like a child, who will sing and shout, though you may be never so deeply pondering in the study, and does not wait for the hour that suits your mind. You do not know what you may find each day. Perhaps you may only pick up a fallen feather, but it is beautiful, every filament] Always beautiful! Everything beautiful! And are these things new? The ploughman and his team, the lark's song, the green leaf? Can they be new? Surely they have been of old time! They are, indeed, new - the only things that are so; the rest is old and grey, and a weariness.[1]

Now Thomas takes up where Jefferies left off:

'So it ends. How true, how false, how unreasonable it all is! Why is he not working in the slums to improve the lot of men whom the Gods will not help? He does but add to the difficulty and absurdity of life, to lie there ill and poor in the monotonous frost, looking out of the window, all

manner of memories, hopes, joys, sorrows coming to his heart as doves to the dovecot. And yet does he not in the end extract more joy than sorrow from it all? Is it not a triumph of beauty and life? It makes for goodness, joy, and beauty in its proclamation that life can endure most dog-like things and yet flourish exceedingly. Always these two truths - the exuberance of nature and the divinity of man. Even if it were all a nightmare, the very truthfulness of the agitated voice, rising and falling in honest contemplation of common sorrows, would preserve it, since it is rarely given to the best of men to speak the truth. Its shape is the shape of an emotional mood, and it ends because the emotion ends. It is music, and above, or independent of, logic. It obeys some deeper law than that which any model could teach. It really has the effect of music, with its succession of thoughts and images wrought into as real a unity as there is in the "Ode To A Nightingale." Some would say the effect is that of religious music, but it rebels against all the gods, against all things except life.'