27 **The Unconscious Teaching of the Country - A re-reading of *Bevis:* The Story *of* a Boy**

By Graham Stoate [1]

Richard Jefferies was born at Coate near Swindon on 6th November, 1846 [sic]. He began his literary career as a reporter on the North Wilts. Herald *in 1866, and wrote later for several magazines and newspapers.* Bevis: The Story of a Boy, *first published in 1882, and its predecessor,* Wood Magic *(1881), represent something of a personal landmark for Jefferies: a literary transition from the pure description of his early natural history essays which had established his reputation as a writer, 'to the more enteric style of his later works, culminating in the heady nature mysticism* of The Story of My Heart *(1883). His two books for children are important works in the history of juvenile literature as early examples of a tendency which rejected the overt didacticism of many Victorian children's novels in favour of a freer and more natural imaginative style.* Bevis *has offered to generations of young readers that joy in the independent life savoured by numerous heroes from Robinson Crusoe onwards. Jefferies's literary career was tragically brief, for he died on 14th August, 1887, his death certificate recording the cause: 'Chronic Fibroid Phthisis. Exhaustion.'*

The invariable response to the name of the nineteenth-century writer Richard Jefferies is the question, vaguely asked, "Isn't that the man who wrote *Bevis?"* There is perhaps a dim remembrance of having read the boys' classic adventure story as a child and correspondingly little recollection of its merits. With the recent reprinting of the book, which includes the excellent original illustrations by the late Ernest Shepard, it is appropriate that it should be re-examined here.

There is an inherent difficulty in attempting a critical appraisal of a book written for children and it is precisely the same challenge which faces the children's author: What appeals to the adult sensibility does not, necessarily, have the same attraction for the child, Kenneth Sterck, writing in this journal, has diagnosed correctly the source of this dilemma; 'the novelist's theme,' he affirms, is calculated to amuse children while his own interests have developed in other, and for them, alien, directions. So if he writes exclusively for the child he may starve his adult perceptions, whereas adult reflection may block the flow of incident which sustains a child's interest.

Richard Jefferies's *Bevis* is interesting because its author attempts to weave these two elements, narrative structure and 'adult reflection', into his writing and, in this abridged edition at least, is relatively successful. The book is, primarily, the story of two boys, Bevis and his friend Mark: a loving recollection of the lost, imaginative world of boyhood, John Clare's 'happy dream, the joyous play/ the life without a sigh'. Surprisingly, until the publication of the Puffin edition, it was this narrative ingredient which constituted the book's major weakness, for as Peter Coveney has said, 'it has singularly little dramatic impulse. It is a strangely static work.' When *Bevis* was first published in 1882, it appeared in three volumes. It was much too long. There were digressions and repetitions; there were several fairly long, intrusive philosophical passages, and if ever a novel demanded an intelligent and sympathetic editor, it was *Bevis.* But here again the same problem arises: what to omit without creating an artistic imbalance between narrative structure and the more adult perceptions the book has to offer?

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Brian Jackson has succeeded in producing an edited version of the novel which, by removing some of the more unfortunate faults without destroying the overall integrity, is much improved on the original. Furthermore, it is a much more satisfactory edition than any of its abridged predecessors. One of these, for example, is notorious for its exclusion of any portion of the text which its squeamish editor considered unsuitable for sensitive, juvenile readers. Consequently, Bevis's and Mark's harsh punishment of the donkey is omitted:

> They tied him firmly to the tree, and then they scourged this miserable citizen. All the times they had run in vain to catch him; all the times they had had to walk. . . . They broke their sticks upon his back, they cut new ones, and smashed them too, they hurled the fragments at him, and then got some more.
> Mark fetched a pole to knock him the harder as it was heavy; Bevis crushed into the hedge and brought out a dead log to hurl at him, — the same Bevis who put an aspen leaf carefully under the fly to save it from drowning. The sky was blue, and the evening beautiful, but no one came to help the donkey.

Richard Jefferies was no sentimentalist as far as children were concerned; one of his notebook entries describes his own son:

> H H cried over a dead swallow and would not kill a caterpillar; yet had the donkey tied to the tree to wallop it more handily,

and he uses his own realistic observations of children throughout to sharpen the book and prevent it from becoming sentimentally or nostalgically over-indulgent. To have omitted this incident would have been to weaken the book's realism. But more than this, it would have resulted in an extremely one-sided presentation of Jefferies's art, which constantly seeks to delineate the violence lurking beneath any seemingly tranquil surface. Here Jefferies has captured the unthinking duality of the child: part-kind, part-cruel, and he contrasts the boys' violence with the peaceful natural setting in which it erupts. *Bevis* is no sentimental or unreal creation; it is not a pious picture of Victorian juvenile virtuosity, but a living, realistic evocation of youthful growth, both mental and physical, during a summer spent in the open air close to Nature.

As such, it contains many elements which naturally appeal to children: there are 'battles', 'shipwrecks', and imaginative adventures on Bevis's own uninhabited island. Nevertheless, the book is something much more than an exciting children's story. It represents a landmark in Jefferies's literary career because, with its predecessor *Wood Magic,* another neglected children's book, *Bevis: The Story of a Boy* records the inner thoughts and feelings which were to inspire much of his later writing and were to form the bedrock of his 'spiritual autobiography', *The Story of My Heart.*

> In an essay entitled 'Saint Guido', Jefferies reveals his disdain for the conventional Victorian education system by painting a bleak, almost Dickensian picture of children learning in school':
> We can hear the hum, hum all day of the children learning in the school. The butterflies fly over us, and the sun shines. . . but the children go on hum, hum inside the house and learn, learn.

Like the Romantics, Jefferies advocated a return to the simpler values of Nature, and in a later novel, *The Dewy Morn,,* advised parents to send their children out into the countryside, for:

> under the green spray, among the hazel. . . they shall find a secret, a feeling, a sense that fills the heart with an emotion never to be forgotten.
> They want the unconscious teaching of the country and without that they will never know the truths of this life.

It is this 'unconscious teaching of the country' which is the central concern *of Bevis: The Story of a Boy.*

Peter Coveney has asserted that *Bevis* was:

> the creation of a passionate virile radicalism .... We feel a sense of battle in his prose on behalf of a childhood constricted by the disciplines of learning,

and, although '.passionate virile radicalism' is an overstatement of a book which Jefferies himself described as growing from merely 'a dream now and then but not all dream', this view has yet some validity. During his tragically brief career, Jefferies became a committed believer in the rights of the individual, and his character Bevis is, certainly, established firmly within the Romantic tradition of the imaginative freedom of the child. Certainly, his responsive portrayal of the boy demonstrates his adherence to the Wordsworthian concept of the 'all-sufficiency' of the child. When Bevis and Mark are prevented from floating downstream by a fallen tree, for example:

> "I thinks you be stopped," said the bailiff having now looked at the tree more carefully. "He be main thick" — with a certain sympathy for stolid, inanimate obstruction.
> "I tell you, people like us are never stopped by anything," said Bevis.
> "We go through forests and we float down rivers, and we shoot tigers, and move the biggest trees ever seen — don't we, Mark?"
> "Yes, that we do: nothing is anything to us."

Jefferies extracts what he sees as the fundamental value of childhood imagination and the vital difference between adult and juvenile outlooks: the child's ability to overcome 'stolid, inanimate obstruction' by creating an imaginative realm where nothing is impossible and where, as Mark puts it, 'Everything is somehow else'.

It is in this frame of mind, Jefferies seems to imply, that 'learning' can best take place. However, it should be understood that the two boys do not really begin to learn anything of great significance until they have also made a symbolic rejection of society itself, by deciding to run away to Bevis's secret island. Only when 'exempt from public haunt' do they find:

> Tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones and good in everything.

The ultimate value of the island experience for Bevis, as I shall demonstrate later, is a heightened spiritual awareness of Nature itself, but before either of the boys is able to achieve such a mystical relationship, they have, paradoxically, in their separation from the real world to come to a truer understanding of it first. As a result, much of the narrative is concerned with describing how the boys tackle the practical problems of daily life. During that summer they learn to swim, fish, sail, shoot and cook while at the same time acquiring a closer understanding of the living, natural world around them. But the important feature of all this 'teaching' is that it is truly 'unconscious'; the boys learn for themselves unrestricted by any didactic or pedagogic influences; even Bevis's 'governor' 'considered it best that they should teach themselves,

and find out little by little where they were wrong.' When the girl Loo comes to their island and the boys discover her stealing food for her starving-family, therefore, their apprehension of reality is complete:

> Now Bevis had always been in contact almost daily with these folk, but yet had never seen. His face became quite white; he was thoroughly upset. It was his first glance at the hard roadside of life.

Once Bevis and Mark have achieved this comprehensive and realistic understanding of things, and only then, Jefferies shows that the way is open for them to begin to perceive a much deeper reality. It is at this point that the narrative becomes charged with adult perception, especially in the lyrical natural descriptions towards the end of the book:

> All the light of summer fell on the water, from the glowing sky, from the clear air, from the sun. The island floated in light, they stood in light, light was in the shadow of the trees, and under the thick brambles; light was deep down in the water, light surrounded them as a mist might; they could see far up into the illumined sky as down into the water. . . Nothing was lost, not a grain of sand, not the least needle of fir. The light touched all things, and gave them to be. . . .
> "Magic," said Bevis. "It's magic." "Enchantment," said Mark.

Here the stress is on the almost overpowering tangibility of the light which prompts an extremely 'physical' visual awareness, a sense of vision in which 'nothing was lost'. But now Jefferies is prepared to advance further: the 'light touched all things and gave them to be,' for the first time linking tangible 'things' with intangible 'light' through the physical medium of 'touch' and implying that this combination was a cipher to some inner mystery. Such passages are not intrusive, however, because they describe mystical experiences which are perfectly credible. The only subliminal response from the two boys is in their childish comments—'magic' and 'enchantment'—and Jefferies is careful to stress that this new apprehension is very much unconscious, or as Wordsworth describes it, 'a mute dialogue':

It was living not thinking. He lived it, never thinking, as the finches live their sunny life in the happy days of June. There was magic in everything, blades of grass and stars, the sun and the stones upon the ground.

Unfortunately, however, towards the end of the original version, Jefferies became increasingly absorbed in trying to analyse and explain exactly what was happening during these moments of mystical reverie:

> The sward on the path on which Bevis used to lie and gaze up in the summer evening was real and tangible; the earth under was real; and so too the elms, the oak, the ash trees, were real and tangible — things to be touched, and known to be. Now like these, the mind, stepping from the one to the other, knew and almost felt the stars to be real and not specks of light but things that were there by day over the elms as well as by night. . . They were real and the touch of his mind felt to them. . . The earth and the water, the oak went far away; he himself went away: his mind joined itself and was linked up through ethereal space to its beauty.

Such 'moments' are, of course, the most important effects of the island experience, and for Bevis the culmination of the process of growth and 'learning' described throughout the novel. Inspired transcendentally by the 'unconscious teaching' of the physical things around him, the 'touch' of Bevis's mind 'felt' to the stars, his corporeal self had become part of a larger spiritual cosmos. But although his spiritual experience is fundamental to the adult Jefferies, the frequency and length with which he describes and discusses it in the original make it tedious reading for children (and even some grown-ups), because narrative becomes submerged in a plethora of essentially adult, metaphysical speculation. In his edited version, however, Brian Jackson has omitted much of

this intrusive material which strengthens the narrative structure without destroying Jefferies's deeper message.

There is one slight editorial misjudgement, which diminishes an important final effect. When Bevis returns home, his mother greets the two boys with a typical parental rebuke:

> "Where are your collars? And gracious, child! just look at his neck!"

Mark's sister, however, realises that both boys have changed since she had seen them last; the original account reads:

> Frances played with Bevis's golden ringlets, but did not kiss him as she used to do. He looked too much a man. She placed her hand on her brother's shoulder, but did not speak to him as once she had done. Something told her that this was not the boy she ordered to and fro.

Mr. Jackson reduces this to:

> Frances placed her hand on her brother's shoulder but did not kiss or speak to him as once she had done. Something told her that this was not the boy she ordered to and fro.

Apart from actually changing the sequence of events surrounding Frances's realisation, this edited version also reduces the dramatic effect of the original. This was, after all, an important moment because it completes the whole process of 'growth' implied throughout, the child was now 'too much a man'.

The long summer of boyhood was over and Bevis had returned home, in a sense to society also, strengthened both physically and spiritually by the 'unconscious teaching of the country', which had instilled in him not merely a better appreciation of the natural world, the practical realities of daily life, and some of the human injustices therein, but also a keen and enduring spirit of adventure. It had inspired him to make his own way in the world 'for himself, and then to begin to come to terms with the 'truths of this life', the inner and deeper reality of Nature.

It is this final, ageless celebration of individuality and self-determination which allows the book to reach across the barriers created by changing times and tastes, and in these modern days of sophistication, to offer a simpler and yet valuable mode of learning. But perhaps the strongest recommendation came from a fourteen-year-old reader. He writes:

> *Bevis* influenced me greatly, it altered my whole approach on life. I used to stay indoors and do nothing but now I want to get out and do something adventurous.

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