

Wild Life in a Southern County.

The Jefferies Society Annual Lecture 1978 by Desmond Hawkins.

When I first received the invitation to give your Society's annual lecture I was immediately seized with two powerful emotions. One was pride, that such an honour should come my way. The other was alarm. I am not a Jefferies expert — whereas you are scholars and students of his work.

However your secretary is a kindly, sympathetic man — and quietly persuasive. He has encouraged me to believe that you will accept me, not as an authority on Jefferies, but — more simply — one of his readers who would like to share with you some thoughts, some reflections and opinions, that spring from my acquaintance with Jefferies's writings — and particularly with his account of what forms the title of my lecture, *Wild Life in a Southern County*. In that area of his work I can at least claim to feel at home. Like him I am a southerner and I have spent most of my life in and around the countryside he wrote about. And the wildlife of the southern counties has been one of my enduring interests — enduring passions, I am tempted to say.

This year I've been rereading the three books that bear most closely on my subject — *The Gamekeeper at Home*, *The Amateur Poacher* and *Wild Life in a Southern County*. Taken together they epitomise the rural scene in Victorian England. And what I want to do now is to put them in the wider context of our changing attitudes to our natural environment so that their particular qualities will stand out the more clearly. It is no accident that Jefferies and Thoreau and W.H. Hudson — and others like them — came when they did, to create a golden age of nature-writing. They were giving expression to the latent consciousness of their time — which is what great writers do for us. We appreciate them more keenly and intimately, I believe, if we can understand the way they are related to those who proceeded them — and also to those who come after them and inherit their tradition.

Let us then picture in imagination two men, from different periods of our history, going out for a day's ramble with Richard Jefferies. One of the men is a Norman of the eleventh century: for his self-defence he will be carrying a weapon of some kind — a sword, a dagger, a lance, something of that sort. The other is a man of the twentieth century, of today: he'll be carrying binoculars and a field guide, and probably wearing this membership badge of some conservation society. He will be unarmed, whereas Jefferies will be carrying a gun, for the sporting pleasure it gives him and as a symbol of human mastery over nature. All three men will be keenly interested in the living creatures they find but their attitudes towards them will be very different.

For the Norman the uncultivated areas, the wild places, were still hostile and dangerous as they had always been to primitive man. But they were also the reservoirs of food, of meat on the hoof — to be had for the asking by those who were skilled in the arts of hunting. If we look more closely at the eleventh century man walking beside Jefferies and the man of today — in our imaginary scene — we shall notice that he is constantly on the alert for two things. One is the danger of a surprise attack. The other is the opportunity to kill something that he can eat. He might take some

pleasure in the colours and perfumes and sounds of the countryside but his main preoccupations would be killing for the larder and avoiding being killed. It's true that the sabre-toothed tiger and the woolly rhinoceros had long been extinct in Britain, but the wolf and the wild boar were familiar to Celt and Saxon, Our Norman friend would think it no surprise to come across one, and he could probably tell you of some occasion when an undefended man, woman or child had been killed by one. After all there were wolves in Britain when Shakespeare was writing, and probably later than that.

So Nature was not to be trifled with. All through Mediaeval England the attitude was severely practical. When they produced a book about wild life it took the form of a treatise on hunting. And for a good reason. The Plantagenets didn't go hunting at weekends because they hadn't got a decent golf-course and they needed the exercise. Admittedly they took pleasure in the arts of hunting — but above all they needed the venison, the game, the meat. Writing about the diet of rural England Sir Jack Drummond tells us that, as late as the seventeenth century, 'the owners of the big estates and the prosperous farmers stocked their larders almost entirely from their own lands. Almost every form of wild life from small birds to deer was trapped or hunted; venison was one of the most popular winter meats.'

That, then, was one of the strong elements in the tradition that Jefferies inherited — that feeling that a bountiful Nature had provided, within the vicinity of one's own home, an assortment of appetising creatures that one was at liberty to seize and kill and eat. And in the character of the farm-bred boy the handling of a gun is a sweet and customary pleasure. You remember how Jefferies described that first gun that his parents gave him –

A beautiful piece of workmanship it was....Long and slender and light as a feather it came to the-shoulder with wonderful ease...The stock was shod with brass, and the trigger-guard was of brass, with a kind of flange stretching half-way down to the butt and inserted in the wood. After a few minutes' polishing it shone like gold, and to see the sunlight flash on it was a joy.

You might note the grain of the barrel, for it had not been browned; and it took a good deal of sand to get the rust off. By the aid of a little oil and careful wiping after a shower it was easy to keep it bright. Those browned barrels only encourage idleness. The lock was a trifle dull at first, simply from lack of use. A small screwdriver soon had it to pieces, and it speedily clicked again sweet as a flute.

But of course it wasn't just the handling of the gun that gave the youthful Jefferies such delight. There was the moment when he first put the gun to its intended use. This is how he describes it –

Suddenly, there was a slight rustling among the boughs of an oak in the other hedge, as of wings against twigs: it was a woodpigeon, better game than a rabbit. He would, I know, first look round before he settled himself to preen his feathers on the branch, and, if everything was still while that keen inspection lasted, would never notice me....A beautiful bird he was on the bough, perched well in view and clearly defined against the sky behind; and my eye travelled along the groove on the breech and up the barrel, and so to the sight and across to him; and the finder, which always would keep time with the eye, pulled at the trigger.

A mere puff of a report, and then a desperate fluttering in the tree and a cloud of white feathers floating above the hedge, and a heavy fall among the bushes. He was down.

At this point I want to direct your attention to the other man in our imaginary trio, to the twentieth century man — as it might be you or me. If we presume that he is tolerably representative of men and women today in a statistical sense we can say that he will not be farm-bred, will probably have little or no rural background but will have grown up in a city or large town with a nostalgia, for wild life and for unspoiled nature ~ amounting almost to a yearning for a sort of Paradise Lost.

Now let us look at him more closely in comparison with his companions. He will not be on guard against conceivable danger from wild beasts: for him Nature is in no sense hostile. He won't be carrying a weapon of any kind and has probably never shot or snared or trapped or hunted anything in his life. What he may have done as a poisoner, with insecticides, another matter. Go far as hunting goes — by which I mean the stalking and killing of a single visible quarry — the man of today is out of touch with the tradition of his ancestors and perhaps out of sympathy as well. On the general question of the control of wildlife he is probably in an intellectual muddle of contradictory views. But whatever his individual attitude to blood sports may be he will not be able to share the conviction, expressed so roundly in *Hodge and His Masters*, that 'the agricultural population speaks as one man upon the subject' and that 'every individual son of the soil would stand up for hunting.' What once was customary and normal is now a matter of controversy — rightly so, you may think, or wrongly, according to your personal opinion.

The other characteristic of today's man that distinguishes him from his two companions is a general air of anxiety, a recognition that the whole wide world of wild life is finite and liable to shrink. We in our generation share a fear that the prodigality and the variety of Nature — and those are the two key words, 'prodigality' and 'variety' — we fear that these are being lost to us and replaced by an oversimplified and stereotyped environment. We see a freely ranging wildlife confined to national parks, game reserves, animal sanctuaries, arks of survival, zoos. The 'tyger, tyger' of William Blake's poem burns each year less bright in the forest of the night. A countryside of large well drained rectangles surrounded by barbed wire, may be an economist's dream but it is so far from the England that our eleventh century Norman would recognise that he might think he had been carried off to a foreign country — to another world almost.

It is here that Jefferies comes into his own as the interpreter — the link — between his two companions, he talks a language they both can understand. He represents the point of balance — and of equal tension — between ancient and modern. He therefore carries in himself the seeds of change. He is marked by the stresses of a time of transition. In the constitution of his genius these are major ingredients.

Let me illustrate what I mean by reading two passages from *Hodge and His Masters*. The first is part of a speech made by Cecil, the man of Progress: this is what he says -

Nothing will ever convince me that it was intended for English agriculturists to go on using wooden ploughs , to wear sack-frocks, and plod round and round in the same old track for ever. In no other way but by science, by steam, by machinery, by artificial manure, and, in one word, by the exercise of intelligence, can we compete with this world.

And then, in contrast, Jefferies later makes this regretful comment — ‘Here in the heart of the meadows romance has departed. Everything is mechanical or scientific’. So he looks back to the past with affection but no illusions, and forward to the future with the recognition that times are changing. It is a mood that he shares profoundly with another country writer, very close to him both in time and in place. Thomas Hardy, born eight years earlier than Jefferies in the neighbouring county, expressed himself in a very similar way when he wrote of the Dorset labourers that ‘It is too much to expect them to remain stagnant and old-fashioned for the pleasure of romantic spectators’.

This concept of romance, of a romantic view of the countryside, is what I want to examine next because it will bring us closer to Jefferies. Historically he belonged to the Romantic Age, to the broad stream of philosophical ideas that we can associate with such writers as Wordsworth and Shelley and Rousseau. *The Story of my Heart* is very much in that tradition. It is indeed the source of Jefferies’s strength as a writer that the practical down-to-earth realism of his day-to-day observations has the inner spiritual illumination of his romantic temperament.

What then had happened between the passing of the old mediaeval attitude to Nature and the more idealised romantic view of the nineteenth century? To put it in a phrase — it had become possible to enjoy and appreciate nature for its own sake. Contemplation could be divorced from action. This general principle was epitomised somewhat ironically in Jefferies, the farmer’s son who could enjoy the ambience of the farm while refusing to become a farmer. And for this fortunate state of affairs he could give thanks for a number of important developments during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In the old view of Nature it was seen as a powerful antagonist which yielded only grudgingly and called for courage and industrious determination in those who sought to subdue it. I don’t know when the phrase ‘the conquest of Nature’ was first used but we can see the idea developing throughout Europe in the Renaissance and afterwards in the period of scientific enlightenment when men felt that they could apply their knowledge to liberate themselves from the besetting fears of the primitive world — fears of dangerous beasts and of famine. When the Royal Society was founded in 1660 it exemplified a confidence that our command and control of our natural environment was steadily increasing. The accumulation of scientific knowledge meant that the wild places, the hostile wildernesses, were being driven back. Man was to be the master now — with Nature no longer the old enemy out at worst neutral and tending to become friendly and gently domesticated, like a wild pony being broken in. This is the new attitude to Nature that you find in the hundred years after the Restoration of Charles II. Man and Nature are nicely balanced and at peace with each other, both able to renew themselves generation after generation

without serious conflict. And it is in this period of relative stability — though towards the end of it — that Jefferies has his place.

Let me pick out one or two features that are worth noticing briefly. 1678 saw the publication of *The Ornithology of Francis Willughby* expanded after his death and edited by his friend John Ray — exactly 200 years before *The Game Keeper at Home*. Willughby and Ray were both Fellows of the Royal Society and they launched a new scientific approach to ornithology, even though some of the old wives' nonsense crept in — for example the assurance that 'a live pigeon cut asunder along the back-bone, and clapt hot upon the head, mitigates fierce humours.' Myself I should have thought it would provoke a pretty fierce humour, but that's by the way. The essential aim of the book is to establish detailed anatomical descriptions of all genuinely identified species of birds and to discredit — as far as possible — the false, legendary and fabulous creatures that existed only in. Someone's imagination. It points the way to Pennant and Bewick and Waterton and of course Gilbert White — the men who patiently put together the body of knowledge on which the later Victorian naturalists were reared.

Not only did ideas about Nature change but the very landscape itself was altered by the application of those new ideas. With the confidence that Nature was now subject to human discipline the formal garden, safely made captive within a surrounding wall, gave way to a style of greater freedom which sought to create a natural beauty in landscaped gardens and parklands. Interestingly it was two poets, Alexander Pope and William Shenstone, who greatly influenced the taste of wealthy landowners in the creation of gardens which aimed at the picturesqueness of Nature — even to the extent of constructing what Shenstone called 'a ruined priory' for ivy to clamber over in a romantically gothic fashion. And it was another poet, Wordsworth, who gave the ultimate expression to this dawning love of Nature as an object of wonder and mystery. Let me recall for you that occasion when Wordsworth revisited the Wye valley in the summer of 1798. Describing himself as 'a worshipper of .Nature' he set down in a poem what the beauties of the valley had meant to him in his memories during five years' absence. He tells us how –

Oft, in lonely room, and 'mid the din
Of towns and cities, I have owed to them,
In hours of weariness, sensations sweet,
Felt in the blood, and felt along the heart.

And he goes on to describe how, for him, Nature is

A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air.
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things. Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods,
And mountains; and of all that we behold

From this green earth.

That mystical pantheism of Wordsworth and with it the process of patient scientific enquiry developing from Willughby and Ray to Gilbert White seem to me to express in simple terms the essential intellectual climate in which men wrote about nature at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In poetry the trend went to the near absurdity of Shelley denying that a skylark could be just a bird — ‘Hail to thee, blithe spirit — bird thou never wert!’ In prose an army of field naturalists rose up — many of them country parsons like Gilbert White -and literally left no stone unturned. In his recent book *The Naturalist in Britain* David Elliston Allen puts the whole matter very clearly in a couple of sentences -

Stripped by science of its outward mysteries, nature gradually assumed a fresh and entirely different mysteriousness, intriguingly elusive and pleasurably unfamiliar in the way in which it teased not just the intellect, but the senses. The long slow process was beginning in which natural objects were to lose their crude, straightforward power to overwhelm and even terrify, and to gain instead a far more subtle affect, by serving as the reflectors of inner human strivings and intentions.

Now you may feel that I have taken a long time to get to that point in the nineteenth century when the curtain can be rung up on Richard Jefferies himself, but I want now to look at his particular gifts; his individual gifts — because of course he is not just the product of the influences I have been describing. He is a distinct and unique man, bringing his special ability to bear on the life of his times,

For me what stands out and immediately arrests ones attention is the intense intimacy that Jefferies has with the things he writes about. He seems to be just as much and as naturally a part of the scene as the trees or the rabbit he is describing. He is in the most literal sense entirely at home with his subject — born to it, reared with it, living constantly in the midst of it. With good reason Edward Thomas claimed that "it is he who, above all others writers, has produced the largest, the most abundant, and the most truthful pictures of Southern English country, both Wild and cultivated¹. Certainly Jefferies takes us as near as we can ever hope to get to those rural scenes from which we are now separated by the passage of a hundred years. I am glad Thomas emphasised the word ‘truthful¹ because rural life is a subject which has attracted a good deal of false sentiment, one way and another. It is not simply a question of factual accuracy out of a dispassionate and objective veracity — an acceptance of human circumstance as it exists. And here Jefferies’s intimate experience at first hand of the intricacies of village life is transmitted to us with the purity of honest observation.

As an example I should like to read to you the account of Luke, the rabbit contractor, in *The Amateur Poacher* — a splendid portrait full of insight into the subtleties of human nature. Alas, it is too long but instead let me quote the brief thumbnail sketch of a lawless, reprobate village that Jefferies calls Sarsen. Here is realism tinged with humour –

Sarsen has no great landlord. There are fifty small proprietors, and not a single resident magistrate. Besides the small farmers, there are scores of cottage owners,

every one of whom is perfectly independent. Nobody cares for anybody. It is a republic without even the semblance of a Government. It is liberty, equality and swearing. As it is just within the limit of a borough, almost all the cottagers have votes, and are not to be trifled with. The proximity of horse—racing establishments adds to the general atmosphere of dissipation. Betting, card-playing, ferret-breeding and dog-fancying, poaching and politics, are the occupations of the populace. A little illicit badger-baiting is varied by a little vicar-baiting.

He has no interest in portraying his world as other than it is. And it is in the same spirit that he goes into the world of Nature, into the solitude that he shares with the wild life of his southern county. He accepts it, joyfully, and strives to deepen his understanding of it. Constantly his mind is inquiring, speculating, sketching out theories, trying to penetrate the mysteries that he recognises. Again it is Edward Thomas who captures this particular quality of Jefferies when he pays tribute to ‘the irruption of an imaginative intelligence into natural history, which is so often in danger of falling into the hands of mere takers of notes’.

As you read *Wild Life in a Southern County* you can’t fail to be struck by this ‘imaginative intelligence’ at work: for example, in this passage –

Birds to ordinary observation seem so unfettered, to live so entirely without rhyme or reason, that it is difficult to convey the idea that the precise contrary is really the case.

Or take this response to some extremely unexpected and untypical behaviour by some redwings —

Nothing could be more thoroughly opposed to the usual habits of the bird. There may be other instances recorded, but what one sees oneself leaves so much deeper an impression...It is instances like this that make one hesitate to dogmatize too much as to the why and wherefore of bird ways. Yet it is just the speculation as to that why and wherefore which increases the pleasure of observing them.

I believe a great deal of his personal philosophy is condensed in that final sentence. It was his power of speculation as to the why and wherefore which added something more to his pleasure as an observer. It was through this that he came to recognise the wonder and the mystery that Wordsworth had found in ‘the green earth’. Jefferies’s medium is prose not poetry, but there is a similar visionary quality in his contemplation of a tiny white-shelled snail crawling up a blade of grass -

The coils of the little shell are exquisitely turned ~ the workmanship is perfect; the creature within, there can be no question, is equally perfect in its way and finds a joy in the plants on which it feeds. On the ground below, hidden among the fibres near the roots of the grass, lies another tiny shell; but it is empty, the life that once animated it has fled — whither? Could any system of notation ever express the number of these creatures that have existed in the past? If time is measured by the duration of life, reckoned by their short spans, eternity upon eternity has gone by. To me the greatest marvel is the countless, the infinite number of the organisms that have existed, each with its senses and feelings, whose bodies now help to build up the solid crust of the earth. These tiny shells have had millions of ancestors: Nature seems never weary of repeating the same model.

There, in his different style, Jefferies seems to me to reach out towards that magical phrase of William Blake's -to see eternity in a grain of sand. It is a poetic vision that — perhaps unexpectedly — shines through the practical details, the observed minutiae, the day-to-day notes of a young sportsman whose mind is often preoccupied with such mundane things as guns and ferrets and the stratagems of poaching. And here I think we can begin to draw together those special qualities in his writing which survive the passing of time and can claim our attention.

He was naturally and instinctively very close to Nature in the old practical way of his ancestors. He enjoyed the closeness of touch, the physical contact, the active pursuit and capture. Do you remember that occasion when he and Dickon went out to course hares on the downs with a couple of greyhounds? For him this was an experience, in Wordsworth's phrase 'felt in the blood, and felt along the heart.' Here is how Jefferies describes it -

A hare starts from the very verge and makes up the Downs. Dickon slips the hounds, and a faint halloo comes from the shepherds and the ploughmen. It is a beautiful sight to see the hounds bound over the sward; the sinewy back blends like a bow; but a bow that, instead of an arrow, shoots itself; the deep chests drink the air. Is there any moment so joyful in life as the second when the chase begins?

That is the spirit of the ancient world, that grateful acceptance of the prodigality of Nature, that bounty of Nature, untroubled by fears that numbers might decline, species might become extinct, habitats might be destroyed — unconcerned with topics of conservation and protection, wholly absorbed in that moment of joy 'when the chase begins.' It is an attitude to Nature that is only really possible when Man and Nature stand to each other in a sort of equilibrium — when Man does not feel threatened and when nature can replenish whatever Man takes from her. Jefferies enjoyed that state of balance and helps us to understand it, as Thoreau did, and Hudson did. When I speak of theirs as a golden age of nature-writing I do so for that reason. They coincided with an historical climax and gave expression to it.

I said earlier that Jefferies lived in a time of transition, that he carried within himself the seeds of change. I want now to amplify that, by taking you to that remarkable final chapter of *The Amateur Poacher* where Jefferies describes how he stalked a pheasant, crawling on his hands and knees until he could raise his gun at a range of no more than fifteen paces. 'I aimed at the head', he wrote, 'knowing that it would mean instant death, and would also avoid shattering the bird at so short a range. My finger felt the trigger, and the least increase of pressure would have been fatal, but in the act I hesitated, dropped the barrel, and watched the beautiful bird.' Then he goes on to tell us -

..that watching so often stayed the shot that at last it grew to be a habit: the mere simple pleasure of seeing birds and animals, when they were quite unconscious that they were observed, being too great to be spoiled by the discharge. After carefully getting a wire over a jack; after waiting in a tree till a hare came along; after sitting in a mound till the partridges began to run together to roost: in the end the wire or gun remained unused, I have entered many woods just for the pleasure of creeping through the brake and the thickets. Destruction in itself was not the motive; it was

an overpowering instinct for woods and fields. Yet woods and fields lose their interest without a gun — I like the power to shoot, even though I may not use it.

How close he comes there to the spirit of Thoreau's famous dictum — 'We hunt in order that we may learn to love — and when we love we no longer need to hunt.'¹

Interestingly Jefferies makes the point that 'the very perfection of our modern gun' is for him one of their drawbacks because the use of them is so easy and so certain of effect that it takes away what he calls 'the romance of sport'. He dreams of wandering through great forests with only the old imperfect weapons — a matchlock perhaps or a crossbow — when everything would depend on one's own personal skill. 'To creep from tree to tree so noiselessly that the woodpecker should not cease to tap — in that', he tells us, 'is joy'. And the imperfect weapon — crossbow or flintlock — would accord with the great oaks, the beech trees full of knot-holes, the mysterious thickets, the tall fern, the silence and the solitude. The chase would become a real chase: not, as now, a foregone conclusion. And there would be time for pondering and dreaming.'

The close action of physical contact, the detached contemplation of abstract knowledge, the illuminations of aesthetic and spiritual insight — these all unite in Jefferies as he honours the past and addresses the future. He brings together the several traditions to the point where the industrial and technological revolutions begin to distort and disrupt the old balance, between Man and Nature. It is no great simplification to say that, for thousands of years, Man had had only three aids in his modification of Nature — the cutting edge of metal implements and weapons, the strength of ox and horse, and the hunting skills of the dog. And to them was later added the gun. What you find in Jefferies — and what is absent in, for example, Gilbert White — is a dawning anxiety about the force and speed of social and material change. 'This railroad age of hurry' is a significant phrase that Jefferies uses. He is not blind to the positive advantages — for instance the new opportunities to escape from the narrowness of the life that village girls had to face.

'You cannot blame those girls', he wrote, 'whether poor or moderately well-to-do, for thinking of something higher, more refined and elevating than the cheese-tub or the kitchen. It is natural, and it is right, that they should wish to rise above that old, dull, dead level in which their mothers and grandmothers worked from youth to age. That world has gone on .since then — it is a world of education, books and wider sympathies. In all this they must and ought to share.'

Even so he had misgivings about the new machinery, the steam plough, the mechanical reaper and binder, the threshing machine. He had at least a first intimation of the problems that lay ahead, the confinement of wild Nature in ever diminishing strongholds. He saw the first signs of the remorseless process that has turned the scenes of his childhood into what they are today.

If we — modern readers — go back to him now it is not for a lesson in natural history. At that level — the bookish, factual level — we could hardly fail to notice the gaps in his knowledge, the errors, the lack of interest even

in the precise identification of species. No, what he offers us is his intensely personal first hand experience, the passionate responsiveness of his senses and his intelligence to every detail of the English countryside in its unspoilt prime. Our task is somehow to define our own attitude to Nature and wild life in the very different circumstances of today. Nothing could help us more than to recapture the spirit in which Jefferies wrote *Wild Life in a Southern County* and his other books. Paradoxically his gun and his snares and his hunting dogs led him to a reverence for life in all its forms. He answers, in terms of the English countryside, that great cry from across the Atlantic that Thoreau made –

We need the tonic of wildness — to wade sometimes in marshes, to smell the whispering sedge. At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed, and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of Nature. We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander.

That feeling for untouched reservoirs of life, for sources of wonder and mystery beyond our comprehension, is of the very essence of Jefferies. For him the deep heart of the woodlands still guarded a sacred grove. ‘The Imortals,’ he wrote, ‘are hiding somewhere still in the woods.’ In that respect he is very close in sympathy to D.H. Lawrence — to the Lawrence who said ‘Drink wine with Bacchus, or eat dry bread with Jesus — but never -sit down without one of the gods.’

To which Jefferies has his characteristic and apt reply —

‘The Imortals are hiding somewhere still in the woods; even now I do not weary searching for them’.

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