

RICHARD JEFFERIES
RELIGIOUS, OR A NON RELIGIOUS
C. Bintcliffe, April 1980

In seeking to assess the mind and temperament of Richard Jefferies it soon becomes evident that we have to heavily rely on what is revealed in his published writings rather than external sources. Granted that there is richness of detail about his work, his movements from place to place, by his biographers, Walter Besant, Henry Salt, Edward Thomas and other writers, but when we consider the abundance of what is known about some other literary figures from sources in addition to their published works, the limitations of what is known of the inner life of Richard Jefferies are considerable.

To take as a contrast; the insights accorded to us into the mind and heart of the literary genius Charlotte Bronte from her many surviving personal letters, her diaries and travel notes, from observations from people who knew her, the partially disguised presentation of herself in her fictional heroines give us a fairly clear picture of her private thoughts.

The case of Richard Jefferies is almost the opposite. We know little of his domestic life, he had few intimate correspondences; a few of his letters and some notes of his movements survive, but apart from his revealings of himself in his writings we are not given deep access to his personal life and thoughts. These revealings are given in some of his fine essays, and reach their climax in his book *The Story of My Heart*.

Published in 1883, the same year as *Nature near London*, *The Story of My Heart* gives in full rein Jefferies' beliefs and philosophy. He found the book difficult to write but it so burned in his heart and mind that he was compelled to do so. Almost certainly the best known of his books, it is a lavishly intimate outpouring of his aspirations and thoughts. Strange, weird in some passages, devoid, of humour, joyous and optimistic, yet with an impatience near to despair at times, it expresses to the point of feverishness his adoration of beauty; it is as intensely personal as Wilde's 'De Profundis' without Wilde's anguish, and contains Jefferies' avowed rejection of traditional Christianity. His statement "I am a pagan, and think the heart and soul above crowns" aroused fierce criticism.

Jefferies' publishers (Longmans) were evidently puzzled with the book and asked Jefferies to write an analysis of it. He did so but admitted the imperfections of his description and as he himself says, the book itself incompletely expresses his thoughts, even though they had stirred in his mind since his youth. He writes:

The Story of My Heart commences seventeen years ago. In the glow of youth there were times every now and then when I felt the necessity of a strong inspiration of soul-thought ...An inspiration – a long breath of the pure air of thought – could alone give health to the heart.

The book stands as his testament to the beauty, the glory of physical life, the wonder and the tragedy of human existence, and to his affirmations of what man can yet be. It also witnesses to Jefferies' rejection of belief in a supernatural being. Divine Providence and guidance.

Jefferies was an avowed pagan, but in some ways his paganism did not fully correspond to that of his predecessors or his contemporaries, nor was it ignoble. He vehemently opposed the prevailing theory of evolution, repudiating the teaching that man's mind developed through thousands of gradations and unreckonable stretches of time from some primal mindless source of life.

'Nothing,' says Jefferies, 'is evolved, no evolution takes place.' Equally he rejects belief in a designed creation, and goes on to assert there may be other causes than either evolution or design, which cannot yet be conceived. It is this which leaves us baffled, and prompts the question 'how can there be any other causes?' Jefferies does not answer, and his suppositions in this issue are neither logical nor tenable, but what cannot be disguised is that the heart of the issue is - in the widest and deepest sense - a religious one. Yet this is not to suggest that Jefferies was a religious man in terms of the Christian religion of his time. It is true that after an illness in his youth he wrote a letter to his affectionate aunt, Mrs. Harrild :-

...God has been merciful to me...I never found my Bible a consolation before, but I have during the last two or three days. I have prayed earnestly and God has answered me.

His sentiments can be taken as quite sincere, for Jefferies in all he was adhered to truth as he saw it, but the letter is that of an inexperienced, callow, hopeful young man twenty years old.

Other observances of the Christian religion in Jefferies' early manhood appear to have been little more than formal. He was married in church and occasionally attended, and had some knowledge of the Bible. To this latter is a reference by Henry S. Salt in his book, *Richard Jefferies, His Life and Ideals*. Salt quotes. Charles Jefferies, one of Jefferies' brothers:-

...my father always manifested a love of reading...his favourite volumes were the Bible and Shakespeare, and he read to us from their pages...Richard's acquaintance with the good old Book was very extensive...it was difficult for anyone to puzzle him with questions concerning it.

The comment - a brotherly admiration - must surely be regarded as exaggeration, for there are but few echoes of biblical language in Jefferies' writings.

But significant - and curious because of Jefferies' later repudiation of traditional Christian religion - is his aside in *Amaryllis at the Fair*:-

I am not a Roman Catholic; but I must confess that if I could be assured any particular piece of wood had really formed part of the Cross, I should think it the most valuable thing in the world, to which Kohinoors would be mud.

One can but wonder what Jefferies would have written had he developed that observation.

More pronounced were his views on religion as he saw it practised in his essay 'The Country Sunday' in *Field and Hedgerow*. He described an independent rural chapel and its congregation:

this great building, plain beyond plainness...this red-bricked crass building. Bethel Chapel combined everything contrary to the spirit of nature. There came every Sunday morning a man and his wife, ten miles on foot from their cottage home...the doctrine at Bethel was the one saving doctrine and there they went. There were dozens of others...came regularly, men in their black coats and high hats; women as red as turkey cocks, panting and puffing... children making the road odorous with the smell of pomade. All with an expression of Sunday goodness: Today we are good, we are going to chapel, and we mean to stay till the very last word.

Jefferies waxes on satirically:

There is no man so feasted as the chapel pastor...his rotund body... red face....his pipe and glass after dinner at the house of one of his stoutest upholders...the cognac bottle is produced...

On the fervour of Bethel worship Jefferies unkindly, but with some justification, writes:

Within an easy walk of each other are eight chapels, three churches and the Salvation Army barracks; a thinly populated country district, the farmers depressed, the cottagers howling about starvation wages. All this for chapel and church; but no cottage hospital...no provision for the aged....no library. Children died from drinking bad water. Does not this seem strange? All this fervour and building of temples and rattling of the Salvation Army drum, and loud demands for the New Jerusalem, and not a single effort for physical well-being or mental training.

Jefferies had come a long way from his facility in answering biblical questions.

His postulate of the existence of 'waves and undulations' as yet then undetected, was a brilliant anticipation of modern scientific discoveries in the realms of physics and of the nature of the universe, but his assertion that 'intelligence comes from the unseen' and 'Full on the faces of men the rays came with their intelligence from the sun', can hardly be reconciled with his belief that the natural world is controlled by a 'force without a mind' and that everything happens by chance 'without any direction of an intelligence'. Jefferies' assertion is not merely a paradox; it contains an inherent contradiction. He claims a belief in the transcendent which is impersonal yet which has intelligence. Jefferies, who worshipped nature, arrives at the conclusion:

I hate nature. I turn my back on it...Finding no mind in nature leads to the dread and mistake lest no mind elsewhere. Analyze the soul; the soul returns.

In seeking to resolve the issue Jefferies was no dilettante. He brooded on it for years, and made several attempts to set his thoughts down coherently. Finally he presented them as clearly and forcefully as he could, but confessed his dissatisfaction with his attempts. He believed in some transcendent power, but avowed it to be non-personal. It was in that in which his reasoning went beyond logic; he presented an inconceivability; a mindless cosmos and a sun which pours intelligence down on men. Though Jefferies was in advance of his time in declaring that outside the circle of known ideas lay infinities of thought, it still remains true that human

capacity for intelligence pre-supposes a source which has intelligence, not one which is completely void, of intelligence, but Jefferies claims that in human affairs everything happens by chance 'without any direction of an intelligence'. Inescapably in 'everything' must be included knowledge, ideas, humanity in its sentiments, contradictions, lovings and hatings and powers.

To that conclusion, 'There is not the least traces of a directing intelligence' he was inevitably driven. It is a conclusion which many people - among them deep thinkers - could not and cannot accept.

With the publication of *The Story of my Heart* Jefferies' name became more prominent, and the book aroused much controversy. Religious journals, Catholic and Protestant, entered the issue. The Rationalist Press printed a pamphlet from the Westminster Gazette, 'The Faith of Richard Jefferies'. Serious minded-reviews began to pay attention to his works. The *Pall Mall Gazette*, which had printed nature and country life contributions from Jefferies, published after his death an article, 'Did Jefferies die a Christian? Reminiscences by people who knew him.'

The article appeared to have been based on the report of Jefferies' dying moments, by Walter Besant, in his book *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies*. The report was not a first hand account, since Besant was not present in those moments. He writes:

His (Jefferies') wife said that their time had for long been 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."

Six years later Henry S. Salt in *Richard Jefferies, His Life and Ideals* refers to Besant's narration of the deathbed scene:

Mr. Besant wrote (to me) that he fully agreed with me on "the unreality of Jefferies' conversion to orthodoxy...I stated in my 'Eulogy' that Jefferies died a Christian. That was true in the sense of outward conformity. His wife read to him from the Gospel of St. Luke, and he acquiesced. I have since been informed that he was weak, too weak not to acquiesce, and his views had never changed from the time he wrote *The Story of My Heart*."

Besant did not divulge the source of his added information; his words, 'I have since been informed' carry the burden of anonymity, and the questions, of necessity, insist; who gave Besant that information? Were there others beside Jessie Baden at the bedside of her dying husband? Or did Jessie Baden herself later give a fuller account of what happened?

We are not told. One can but think that if the last moments of Jefferies' life had been clearly made known, the controversies would not have arisen. Time took the arguments away, and some of the interest in Jefferies waned. Now and again one or other of his books was re-published, but the general literary opinion was a mild surprise that Jefferies even retained a minor place in English literature; he was no great novelist, he wrote chiefly about nature, he rarely quoted other writers, his self-thought-out philosophy verged on the obscure, there were other lucid writers, his nature observations could have been observed by anyone, and his own life was unremarkable. Every word of it was true, yet Jefferies' name survived when

many other authors and books - apart from the established classics - were losing recognition.

Nor can it be gainsaid that Jefferies and his near contemporaries of similar social ideals lived in a world compared with which the twentieth century world is unbelievably different. They could scarcely have conceived its realities, for in the thirty years between 1890 and 1920 whole ways of life and thought changed. Those years were a prodigious watershed. On one side lay an era which, in spite of wide-spread poverty for the many and rising prosperity for the few, was based on apparently strong foundations. Men in their lifetime had known no major war. The Monarchy and the Establishment under-girded society; Britannia ruled the waves and the gold sovereign underwrote financial security. Most people worked long hours, had little leisure, meagre education, but shared in some degree the belief that progress and civilisation were advancing. The utopian twentieth century lay ahead. Social idealists and visionaries envisaged a new and wonderful world for humanity. The ape and the tiger in men's hearts would be vanquished. A better world was in the dawning. Men fervently sang Blake's 'Jerusalem' and poets wrote their visions: despite the harshness of the times there was an air of optimism, a belief that human nature and the world were steadily improving,

'These things shall be, a loftier race
Than e'er the world hath known, shall rise
With flame of freedom in their souls
And light of knowledge in their eyes.'

But few men glimpsed the shapes of things to come; the advances in science, the researches into the human mind, the questionings of political and religious concepts. The watershed divided the centuries, but men in some measure still believed that a fairer future lay ahead, and that civilisation and human goodness were self-evident facts. They had faith in these things until, with an unprecedented shock, war broke out. Two great nations of centuries of civilised traditions flew at each other's throats. The ape and the tiger in the heart of man, far from being vanquished, exulted and took on the garbs of patriotism, glory and self-sacrifice. Social idealism, faith in human integrity, belief in a noble future, received crippling wounds. The inherited social optimisms all but vanished in less than a decade. Many of the norms and anchorages of the 19th century perished. In their places were mistrusts, hates and despairs, but on marched the developing sciences; communications, researches, technologies, inventions, discoveries, mass manipulations and new tyrannies. And with the tyrannies, horrors and obscenities and tortures on magnitudes unequalled in history. The utopian dreams of the 19th Century idealists were shattered.

Akin to those idealists was Richard Jefferies who wrote:

I hope succeeding generations...may enjoy their days, and the earth, and the beauty of this world...that they may rest by the sea and dream, that they may dance and sing and eat and drink. I will work to that end with all my heart...that they will find perfection of their physical frames, in the expression of the mind and in enlargement of the soul. I am willing to divide and share all I have for this purpose.

Jefferies, a non-religious in the traditional sense of religion, a man of vision and belief in the transcendent, and with an idealised reverence for human life, and to whom such a simple thing as water had a sacramental quality - what relevance has he today?

He had no great influence, he was no politician with a finger on the public pulse, he was no devotee of a particular culture, no influential educationist, no spiritual contender for the souls of men. Why does his name and why do some of his varied writings still persist? Why do a small but increasing number of people read him? What is it about Jefferies which exercises even a minor influence?

It is true he had a passion which few others had for the things of the earth, sunlight and the open air, and that passion so charged his mind that he had to express it in abundant word? But that hardly warrants his continuance. His surveys of agriculture and country life are no doubt useful to those who study that period, but others too wrote about them. His novels, even the passable ones, are not outstanding. Why, then, does he still have readers among whom are men of literary accomplishment?

Allowing the different appeals in his writings to different readers, the distinctive quality in Jefferies is not so much his profundity, his obscure philosophy, his mystical experiences, his social idealism - these are there - but his joy in life itself. It is not only the bucolic joy in physical strength and activity, but also the joy of a child, of a creative artist, a joy in seeing, hearing and touching. A joy sensuous, yet of the spirit, experienced only by those uncorrupted by a mania for possessions, excessive ambitions, vulgarity, or love of power over other people. So sensitively did Jefferies feel this joy that he found its richness almost everywhere, in the prodigality of nature, in plants and trees producing millions of seeds, few of which take root and live, in the careless abundance of wind—blown leaves, in the flight of a swallow, in the myriads of night stars, in the immensity of the sea waves lazily breaking on the shore. In continual streams of images on his eye and senses these things became born again in his writings, for men yet to be born. Should men — whether their future be hazardous and fearful, or comfortable and secure — lose their capacity for such joy, that loss will be a measure of the poverty of their spirit.