BEVIS – THE STORY OF A BOY.

A talk given by Mark Daniel to the Richard Jefferies Society 3rd February 1975. (The page references are to the Everyman Edition of 1930)

'When Mrs. Gay first asked me to do a talk on "*Bevis*" I was quite pleased because, of all the books I've ever read, none has given me such pleasure as this. However, now that I have to actually do it, I have serious misgivings because I don't see how I can. possibly do justice to such a remarkable piece of writing. It would take someone with much greater power than I possess to find words for the pleasure that some of Jefferies writing. Of course, this is what makes his work so wonderful. He was to find words for those feelings which imaginative people have always had, but which in most of us leaves a sense of frustration at the inability to express them. To be able to articulate the pleasure in natural things, the wind in your hair or a night full of stars, for instance, is to increase the pleasure. And, through the writings of the very few men or women of Jefferies calibre (Richard Adams of "*Watership Down*" is one) these feelings can be evoked almost at will. This, I think, adds a great richness to life. But "*Bevis*" contains much more than this. It conveys to us in a most refreshing way the joy of an unfettered youth.

I first discovered "*Bevis*" when I was about twelve. It had been bought for an elder brother some years before and left lying around. I was able to dwell on the fascinating parts and skip other bits as I pleased. Unlike "set" books at school which often put a child off an author for life.

Written in 1882, when he was 34 and at the height of his powers, it tells of the everyday activities and feelings of two boys for whom the exciting possibilities of their world are just dawning. And no namby-pamby life it is either. Living on an island, fighting the village lads, shooting and fishing, its all there. I expect most of us can remember that time when almost everything in life (outside school and duty and so on!) was touched with a, sort of magic. Well "*Bevis*" takes us back to those days, which I am sure are much the same for every normal child in every country or every age.

From the people and geography of the book it is clear that Bevis is Jefferies himself, and Mark, his best friend, is actually his young brother Harry. So *Bevis* is the story of the boy Jefferies as he remembered himself and the people and places of his youth.

But Jefferies, who from the earliest had suffered through illness and loneliness, cut the bitterness right out of the story. There was enough of that with him while he was writing. A sickly boy, he wrote of glowing health. Lonely, he wrote of the staunch friend who went everywhere with him. Aloof from the village lads, he lead them in mock battles. And in the whole book, I don't think it rained once!

But what gives such remarkable realism is the fact that almost every stick, stone, tree, hedge or gate actually exists (or did until recently) and we know from other books that Jefferies was almost incapable of invention. Almost every character or situation was drawn from life. Bevis was the real Richard Jefferies. or the one he would have been had circumstances been a little less cruel.

And this is why we are so keen to preserve the old places which Bevis or Jefferies knew. By showing us the beauty and wonder of the natural world through these scenes of his youth they have gained, an importance. Just why this is so I don't know, but how satisfying and reassuring it is , having thrilled with Bevis at the view of the New Sea from the top of Burderop Wood, to see that It actually is there and exactly as he described.

As I say, I first discovered *Bevis* and Jefferies when I was twelve. It was many years later that I found that other people whom I greatly admired, like Henry Williamson and Kenneth Allsop, had been similarly affected. Allsop described in an article in *The Sunday Times* how his boyhood saturation in *Bevis* had led him to Swindon just to take a job on the "*Advertiser*" where Jefferies worked. It was a very pleasant surprise to find I was in such good company.

The story opens with Bevis being given a large flat box which had contained, a picture. After rejecting the temptation to split it up with a hatchet he decides first to use it as the roof of a hut, and then changes his mind and makes it into a raft. His efforts to get the raft launched on the stream at the bottom of Brook Field give a good idea of his doggedness and other aspects of his character - about which more later on.

I found all this fascinating as a boy but what I now find so interesting is the exact relation of the story to the actual place. This piece gives a good idea of it:

Chapter one , P.5
The grass close to the rails was not long.---where the mowing grass was still higher. John, the labourer, was mending the hedge at the top of Home Field and Bevis tried to persuade him to help:

Chapter Two , P5

"*He raced up the meadow and found the labourer --- while those grey eyes were about, work, you may be sure, was not slack.*"

The great oak is gone now but it meant a great deal to Bevis or Jefferies. He mentions it again and again in several books.
Bevis tried to get Polly, the dairymaid, to help him. However she was busy in the dairy and hunted him out, but he finally bribed the carter's boy to hitch up the horse and tow the raft to the stream. The raft made a broad swathe through the mowing grass all the way to the drinking place. (A very bad thing to do with mowing grass apparently, but Bevis didn't care!)

Mark appears through the gateway between Brook Field and Home Field having come from his own home which was probably Day House Farm. This idea is reinforced by references to Big Jack turning up Day House Lane to see Frances, Mark's sister.

After the usual difficulties the raft at last floats down with the triumphant Bevis aboard until it fetches up against a large leaning willow. Bevis is extremely selfish and refuses to let Mark have a go. The carters lad is hauled away by the scruff *of* the

neck by the angry bailiff - and Bevis doesn't even notice. He and Mark are planning, how to blow up the tree or dig a canal round it. They even start digging and keep it up for a good five minutes.

Polly, who has been standing on the ha-ha wall shouting and waving for them to come to dinner , comes down at last and hauls them away.

Looking at the scene today it appears that the stream has been straightened since those times. The boys had proposed to dig a canal which would have cut off a large bend - but in fact it was probably a twentieth century excavator that did it to facilitate cleaning out. Certainly the old Ordnance Survey maps of about 1840 do show a winding stream, and even the Deeds of the sale of the land to the Council in 1926 still show a winding course. The drinking place is gone but almost everything else Is still identifiable.

Jefferies uses this first chapter to describe the scene as he remembered it, and such a detailed recollection reveals a great affection for everything about the farm and the meadows. *Bevis* and many other of his books show the passionate attachment he felt for the place, and should reinforce our resolve to save what *we* can for future Jefferies readers.

I'd just like to mention the small piece of land south of Brook Field, which I think was called Little Brook Field. The hedge dividing it has been grubbed up a long time ago but its position can be gauged by the nettlebeds which only grow where the land has been disturbed or where bark or dead branches have rotted down into fertile soil. This is where the new gate was, beautifully made by Iden in *Amaryllis*.and where the very sick Amadis (Jefferies?) sat with Amaryllis, loving her and cursing, his own weakness.

Jefferies was always fascinated by water and, before following the story out of these home meadows, I'd like to read a passage where Bevis and Mark are sitting by the rails running across the stream near, the hatch, where the water poured out from beneath the dam embankment.

Chapter Three, P.22.
The moorhens did not appear again.---the delicious brook filled their ears with music.

The boys then decide to explore the lands beyond the lake and, if possible, to get all the way round. They get started at last; after stopping. to investigate thousands of roach spawning on the stones near the dam. They then go along the water's edge close to the modern paddling pool, until they come to a steep brow overhanging the water. Mark, the more practical one, nips around over the top. Bevis refuses to be deflected and manages to edge his way across the cliff face itself, gaining considerable self-satisfaction and respect from Mark. The brow is still there for any of us to try the same trick., only it has diminished in the last hundred years. But Jefferies was writing as he remembered it; and to a child it must have been formidable.

Higher up the hill above the quarry stood some enormous sycamores which featured in the battle with the village lads. A short distance away was a peculiar deep bowl-shaped hollow where some of Bevis's side hid and ambushed their opponents, and where later in the story they cook and eat a moorhen which Bevis shot with bow and

arrow. This hollow is exactly as described, only now there is an iron fence which stops one reaching it easily. (Actually there is a place nearby where young vandals have damaged the fence - allowing old Jefferies fans to get through!)

Incidentally, the place marked in the Everyman edition Map of the Bevis Country as the place where the moorhen was shot is quite wrong, as is the swimming place. Both were near Fir Tree Gulf according to the text. And the map in the new Puffin edition is pure imagination.
Bevis and Mark go on around. Fir Tree Gulf, just south of the quarry and find themselves trapped in a foetid marsh with tough reed grass higher than their heads, and dangerous deep holes here and. there. Bevis, of course, refuses to turn back and they eventually get out by forcing their way to the high hedge which they get over by climbing a willow and swinging across.

I went through this way a couple of years ago and can vouch for its being almost exactly as described a hundred plus years ago. Only the more intrepid modern anglers have made a track of sorts, but for the rest, deep holes and all, it's the same. The hedge, of course, has grown up into individual trees and one doesn't have to shin up a tree to get out although the marsh is still pretty impenetrable. They find themselves in an ash wood - apparently without crossing the Broome Manor Lane. Now Jefferies may have written out the lane to assist the story or perhaps it stopped short of its present position on the south dam. Certainly, my old Ordnance Survey map of the 1840's shows only rough tracks, with Broome Manor Lane definitely not connecting with Hodson at all. Hodson was connected to Nightingale Farm on my map.

From that point in the story the geography has hardly changed, right up to the top of Burderop Wood (apart from the M4!) with the boys now completely lost and imagining they were still near the lake. Then the marvellous sight of their beloved New Sea a long way off and from a wonderfully new angle.

Then their discovery of the "Witche's Cottage", (actually the Gamekeeper's Cottage which we all know). Their being escorted by a village girl to the Marlborough Road, and then picked up by Jack, the big young farmer, who gives them a lift as far as Day House Lane.

Very little has changed rea11y, if one can keep things like motorways in perspective. The trees and fields are still as beautiful and Liddington Castle probably won't change much for another 2000 years, not much anyway. And more people have the time and leisure to enjoy the scene.

Before going on let's have a couple of bits from the wood of 100 years ago:

Chapter.Six, P 45

"Listen" said Mark presently ---the noonday silence in that wild, deserted place was strange.

Chapter Eight, P.58
"What a long, way we can see" said Mark --- and glide over the rising waves below.

Later that night, as we heard at the Wyvern Theatre a few months ago, the boys decide to have a war. The whole tone of their life seems to have been one of imagination and action, and this latest episode was to involve plenty of both. But it was to be something glorious with lots of clattering and charging around, in the old style, nothing squalid like rifles. And they decide against spears and bows and arrows because eyes would get poked out and there would be trouble from grown-ups. (Incidentally, all the way through, grown-ups are remote and are obviously necessary evils to be avoided whenever possible.)

They decide on a Roman sort of war with "Caesar". Bevis and "Pompey" Ted being the leaders on each side. I've often wondered whether the social order of the times permitted games to take place between middle-class children, like Bevis and Mark, and the cottage children. But I think that when they were going over the names of possible participants they only chose lads of their own sort. Several, who may have seemed from their dialect to be of humble origin, show during the pre-battle discussions, a surprising knowledge of history. They were probably drawn from life among real farmers sons in the district - lads with some education. (Much later in the book when Bevis discovers how some of the other half live, he is horrified. One gathers that the classes kept well to themselves although living so close together. A very strange thing which many of us, nevertheless, recollect.)

The war is a splendid affair with plenty of sword-play and real bruises. There is the drama of the cohort waiting in reserve, when it should, have been charging out and saving the heros (Bevis's side) from almost certain defeat. One side was to be declared the winner when the other's leader was captured and bound. There is a very sticky moment when Bevis and Mark, and one or two defenders, are beaten to their knees beneath the sycamores by the quarry. Little Charlie, who is stuck up a tree, where he had been shoved as a look-out, could see the crisis but couldn't get down to call up the reserves. He finally jumps from a dangerous height and saves the day, in the nick of time.

Several times Bevis, who isn't generally free with his praise of anyone, says appreciative things about Little Charlie and I've often wondered if he was little brother Charles, father of Mrs. Herbert who is still alive and well in Guildford. (Living in a house called Coate.)

The reinforcements arrive, cut in the schemozzle, Bevis falls over the edge of the quarry and is only saved from death by a hurdle which had fallen over, some time before, and jammed across a narrow part of the diggings.

To avoid capture he climbs into the punt, used by the old man who lived by the park entrance to carry sand. But the rocking of the boat, and the wind and waves carry the punt out into the middle of the lake. He is only saved by jumping out onto an island as the punt is swept past. Bevis was marooned and Mark, back at Coate Farm, is in disgrace at his disappearance and is locked in the cellar by the bailiff. He escapes, and seeing Bevis's distress fire, rows out through the storm and rescues him. (I am puzzled by the cellar. Mr. Sladden, the present tenant, says he's never been able to find it. Was it filled in, I wonder?)

One thing that does come out of this episode is Jefferies tremendous affection and respect for his staunch younger brother, Harry.

The island becomes the centre point of the whole story when they go there later and live like Robinson Crusoe. An almost impossible dream which many boys must have had, and a few, including Jefferies, may actually have done something very like it. I used to be quite sure that Bevis or Jefferies had done all these things, and as a boy of twelve I made a real gun myself, following Bevis's account. It actually worked, too, but before I had the chance to hunt with it, it was discovered by my father and destroyed. Just as Bevis's father would have done probably! However, I continued making gunpowder, which I couldn't buy in 1938, until a slight accident blew my front hair off.

I am now more certain that ever that the high, sandy, tree-covered island in the book never actually existed. There may have been a few low marshy ones; but not the sort where you could hunt rabbits or dig a cave as a store-room. It has been said, that, in Jefferies' day, the level of the water was much lower so the island was really there, but so much of the rest of today's scene is so similar that the difference in water level could not have been great. However, someone with more knowledge may convince me otherwise.

Having decided to go and live on the island, the boys have two important things to do. First they have to make the gun they'd talked of for ages. They do this by picking the brains of the blacksmith, whose forge was near the park entrance, and then using an open fireplace at the labourer's cottage - where they forged the breech in a piece of iron pipe. Secondly they have to cook up a story to give to their parents. They tell them they've gone to stay with Jack, up in the hills. Little Charlie is to give a signal every day to signify that they hadn't been missed. At last all is prepared, provisions pinched from the larder, and off they go.

The several chapters devoted to their existence on the island describe in most satisfying detail the life they led; their conversations and feelings, how they learnt to shoot and cook, build the hut and so on. Far from being tedious, as too much detail can sometimes be, this is captivating and many people have said how they can completely lose themselves in it.

They go off exploring on. a raft they built. They investigate the Waste - a piece of scrubland towards the south-west corner of the lake., Here they found, an enormous boulder, higher than their heads, with strange, cup-like hollows in it - probably magic. The stone is still there, half hidden in the scrub, and exactly as Jefferies described.

Then there is the drama of the mysterious creature which comes and goes unseen, and pinches things from the pantry. They are terrified for days until they learn the cause.

As well as being vivid and interesting much of this part of the book has a special beauty and begins to reveal some of the mysticism and vision which Jefferies develops more completely in "*The Story of My Heart*" a year or so later.

Bevis had been adjusting their improvised sundial, using sightings on the North Star to get it oriented properly; as he looks at the stars reflected in the water, the stillness and. peace of that remote spot affect him deeply. He remembers that the same

stars are also shining over his house, which feels a very long way away, and suddenly starts to feel as well as just to know that he and the trees and the world are floating in space! He experiences a strong sense of being, not just in the universe, but part of it , and a feeling of transcendence. In writing of it Jefferies reminds us of those self-same feelings which we have all had but could, never express.

Chapter Thirty-Five,P.289 *"The heavens were as much a part of life as --- he lived out and, felt out to the sky."*
In this chapter Jefferies recalls every bush, tree, roof-top and star as they appeared, to him twenty years, or more before at Coate. And I must confess to a certain satisfaction when, standing in the same place a hundred, years later; I can recognise some of the same things.

I'd like to say a bit about the development of Bevis, or Jefferies character as the book progresses. It appears at first reading that all the events take place between early summer and, winter in the same year. But in fact, I think this is an autobiography covering at least five or six years from about the age of ten. His pleasure in small things, in the early pages, and childish temper, cruelty and selfishness, are clear1y those of a young child. Later, you can feel the greater self-control and, much more mature attitude to prob1ems and peop1e.

'Bevis' gives great insight into Jefferies' character, both as he remembers himself as a boy, and as he writes as a man. Very difficult to sum up in a few words, but I'11 try:-

He had a dislike of people who tried to control or dominate him. (excluding only his parents.) His remarks about Polly (the long-suffering maid) the bailiff, the punt man, even John Young who used to help him sometimes, show complete contempt. His comments about the other boys too, are either neutral or hostile, except for Mark and Charlie who worshipped him. (They were probably his brothers in rea1 1ife, anyway.)

But how different is his attitude towards the weak or feeble, or to young girls. For instance,- his distress when he discovers a little girl on the island and hears about the virtual starvation at home when father's on the beer. And listen to this piece describing Frances, Mark's sister:

Chapter Twenty-two, P.177. *She had her hat in her hand --- just enough acid to make you want some more, rare and seldom found.*

And this piece describing an old man whose time was almost come. (This must have come from Jefferies more mature reflections as a man himself.)

Chapter Fifty-0ne, P.409
"Under the tree there stood an aged man --- as "Jumps" he had been knowᵐn for two generations and he would have answered to no other. " "Under the oak he stood --- shall not the soul arise?"

He seems to have been a very practical man. His descriptions of tasks and problems solved could not have been purely imaginary, and the whole theme of the story is perseverance and ultimate success, just as in real life only death could stop him.

But if I had to choose just two fragments of the book to try and illustrate the scope of Jefferies' feeling for the natural world , I would go first to page two; Bevis has seen something in the stream near his home:

Chapter One, P.2
"*It was a large fly -- fluttering in the swift water*"

None of these little things are simply unconnected or insignificant events, they are all small but important parts of the natural world-in which all things are inter dependent. And the natural world is just a part of the great universe which he loved.

And then to the very last page of the book, when Bevis and Mark were walking home from the lake one winter's night:

Chapter Fifty-Two, P.423 On their way home they paused a moment --- and the stars are always over the ocean. "