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REPORT ON THE RICHARD JEFFERIES CENTENARY

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WHEN the 'bus that had brought us to Swindon on 19 July 1948 stopped in the lower town, the first thing we saw was a poster advertising the Jefferies Centenary celebrations, which were to last a week. There, larger than life, was Jefferies' face on many posters. Wandering around, we came to the Civic Centre, and entered a cool and light hall. A surprising sight met our eyes. There were paintings on the walls, all of aspects of the countryside that Jefferies had written about; while around the large, well-planned room were glass-topped stands containing his first editions and manuscripts. As for the hall itself, it was set with rows of chairs, as in a theatre. Indeed it was a small theatre. It was also a dance hall, a lecture hall, a place for parties: a centre of community, wherein people of like tastes might come together and be happy. If only Jefferies' father and mother could have lived to visit it!

Upon the stage was scenery of bird and animal characters recognisable from *Wood Magic.* While we were looking at it—Helen and Ann Thomas, and myself—someone came to us and said that the children had made it, for their play from that book. What children? Oh, local boys and girls. We learned that the Civic Centre had grown-out of war-time gatherings when evacuees and others had come together in the spirit of creative service. That was heartening, like the splendid work done by the Women's Institutes in villages throughout Britain. But there was more to it than that: the idea of a permanent memorial to Richard Jefferies was not to be a stone effigy standing in a square, but a Field Naturalists Club for young people. Could this be Swindon, through which the pale and derided Jefferies had hurried in youth, knowing in loneliness that his gifts were authentic, that the 'pale ray from heaven' had touched him? Yes, indeed; this was Swindon. We were glad that we had come.

The luncheon was in the Goddard Arms, in the higher or old town—for men only, so the ladies went to find a cafe, where they could have, among other things, their companionate pot of tea. One of Jefferies' first writings was a *Memoir of the Goddards of North Wilts* in his early twenties, or even before, when he was a reporter on the local newspaper. Perhaps Squire Goddard had been the original of that memorable portrait of the Old Squire in *Hodge and his Masters.* But lone musings were cut short, by an introduction to the Mayor. Here was no Mayor of conventional fiction holding out a hand; here was no 'aldermanic proportion', no heavy weight of office, of business. Here was the face of a plowman behind his team of horses: whose flail had bounced on the oaken threshing boards of a Barn floor: the man with the sickle whose breastbone had burned black in the harvest sun. Here was the close-cropped hair, the square brow, the open brown face, the slight but powerful yew-wood-and-leather figure of an archer at Agincourt. Of such stock was the man who during years of difficulties had, without wavering and always with creative cheerfulness, built up Swindon's branch of the Salvation Army.

About two dozen men were present at the tables. I sat next to a personality of whom I had heard and read much, but with whom the spark of acquaintanceship, or maybe friendship, had yet to be struck—one whose persistent and prolonged passion for Jefferies had converted him into something of a phenomenon.

To tell the truth, I was a little apprehensive of Mr. Samuel J. Looker. I was not at all sure how this authority on Jefferies, with his plans, as I had heard, for a Definitive Edition running into scores of volumes, regarded the amateur efforts of myself, in the past, to extend the range of Jefferies' readers a decade before the Centenary, by issuing a brief anthology of his works, and an edited edition of *Hodge and his Masters.* Perhaps he regarded me as a vandal, for had not a sentence of my own been added to that work, a few authentic sentences removed, and one or two split infinitives been corrected? At least we would be on common ground on the matter of my own inadequacy in that task; and with that confession the slight initial constraint was broken. I think we got on after that: for Looker was to Jefferies, as had been Kurwenal to Tristan. It was an inevitable devotion, for life, and to be defended to the death. For more than forty years Samuel Looker had been the dead writer's disciple, testator, and executor, ever on the search and watch for manuscripts and notebooks which otherwise might have been lost. Such devotion does not consider personal gain, or seek fame for itself; and woe to any pretender who may appear to usurp the fostering service. Samuel J. Looker was the living vehicle for everything ever written or thought by the dead master. Within his brain-cells were the records, both literal and emotional, of tens of thousands of hours in the rooms of the British Museum, of searching through all possible periodicals of the 'seventies and 'eighties of the last century, poring over and hunting through columns of small dark print for a familiar inflexion, a haunting cadence, an illumined fact which looked as though the anonymous writer might have

been Jefferies himself. For Richard Jefferies, much more than Edward Thomas, wrote a very great deal of hack-work; and Samuel J. Looker, with a patience and determination surpassing that of the author of *The Road to Xanadu* had sought it all out. And since Jefferies had not been able, by circumstances of lingering and exhausting illness preceding an early death, to collect all his writings between the covers of books— perishing like Thomas, before the age of forty— S.J.L. had assumed, as a sacred duty, to do that service for him, and for English Literature.

After the luncheon we went to Coate Farm, strolling from room to room, kindly ushered by the present occupiers. Thence we trooped to Day House Farm, where, we were told, Jefferies courted Jessie Baden, and where he imagined the last scene of *Round about a Great Estate,* seeing Antares the summer star above the branches of an apple tree in the orchard one summer night. Little details, but how significant for those who long ago had read his books, and imagined the solitary, bearded, blue-eyed figure upon Liddington Hill, in the light of "the great sun bursting through untrodden space", while the shadow of the hawk fled over the turf on the fosse of the Roman encampment. And there, a little apart from the others, in the meadow where often Richard Jefferies had crossed on his way to see his darling Jessie, stood his daughter in the flesh, the Phyllis of the dedication of *Bevis, the Story of a Boy,* the little girl who had 'kissed the poor dead face' again and again, as seen by North the artist on that Sunday afternoon of 14 August 1887 when he had called to see Jefferies and found him 'twelve hours lying dead'. The same blue eyes, the same cast of countenance . . . about two score of people gathered in the barn, sitting on bales of straw and farm implements, prepared to listen to Mr. Looker.

As he spoke to the assembly in the Dutch barn adjoining Day House Farm, a blackbird began to sing on an electric cable pole, and milkmen in white caps and aprons, and rubber boots, passed to the sheds beyond, while small boys sitting on a tractor were trying the gears and steering. Mr. Looker spoke as one who was still struggling in the wilderness to make the worth of his hero known. Forty years of pleading the cause of one he had never known physically, forty years of travelling all over England to book and manuscript auctions, often without food and in discomfort, in the hope of obtaining a notebook or a manuscript, were behind the earnest words. The theme, and the urge, recurred in the evening, when Mr. Reginald Arkell, one of a long line of Wiltshire yeomen and a writer of the easier moods of mankind, had opened the meeting at the Civic Centre. Mr. Looker was pleading with an audience to accept the fact that Jefferies was a great poet and visionary who was not yet acceptable to the English; for had not this critic, and that critic, he declaimed with a bitterness near to distress, in a recent causerie of opinions sought from various living writers by the editor of a post-war country magazine, written disparaging or minimising words about Jefferies? The speaker's emotion, and the sincerity of his feeling, were such that several times the more sensitive among the audience were near to tears, induced by what the speaker himself was feeling and putting forth. Some of the listeners may have wished that the speaker had not allowed himself to be affected by these solicited and ephemeral opinions. It was merely the 'Loony Dick' or 'Lazy Loppet' kind of criticism being uttered again. They were inevitable; for, since during the past fifty years everyone in Britain had been taught to write and also to read, everyone therefore was a writer and all were critics; and surely it is common knowledge by now that what we write of others is but a self-judgment?

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The Notebooks of Richard Jefferies, edited by Samuel J. Looker (The Grey Walls Press, London, 12s. 6d.) lies on the table as these notes are written this swelking day of July 1948. It is a pleasantly produced book, of 291 pages. Mr. Looker tells us in an introduction that they are transcripts from sixteen leather-covered note-books size 4½" x 3".

> There were twenty-four, but eight have disappeared. Some entries are in shorthand, and have proved undecipherable.

The writing of the introduction has improved since Mr. Looker's *Worthing Cavalcade* of a few years back, an original compilation which, for some reason, omitted in its otherwise comprehensive records of what had been written in praise of Jefferies since his death some fairly well-known writings by living writers. These omissions at the time were puzzling; or were they significant? In the introduction to the *Notebooks* there is a paragraph which may cause a momentary check in the reading,

> Jefferies has . . . never received due recognition from critics and nature writers, some of whom, without acknowledgment, have themselves climbed to success on his shoulders.

Can this be so? For usually young nature writers, influenced by Jefferies, have not been backward in extolling their master. Is it a generalisation which indicates only Mr. Looker's recurrent feeling that his

hero is not properly appreciated? That, like the good shepherd, he thinks only of the lamb that is lost to the fold, and not of the ninety and nine that are already inside? *Never received due recognition from critics and nature writers?* Surely the good shepherd has taken a glance now and again at the ninety and nine within the fold? To name but a few whose names occur to the mind —Edward Thomas, Edward Garnett, E. V. Lucas, Henry S. Salt, D. H. Lawrence, Wilfrid Ewart, 'T. E. Lawrence', W. H. Hudson, Sir William Beach Thomas, Sir John Squire, Messrs. A. G. Street, Adrian Bell, R. M. Lockley, Reginald Arkell, and the present writer —among scores of others. Of course Mr. Looker knows of the appreciation of these fellow writers, for only a month after writing the Introduction to the *Notebooks,* he is writing another for *Chronicles of the Hedges* (which he tells us is Jefferies' own title) and declaring

> There is no longer any doubt among reputable judges as to his true and lasting service to Letters.

It may be that hyper-sensitivity in all matters dealing with Jefferies, indicated here and there in the introductory writings (of the last entries in the *Notebooks* Mr. Looker says, 'I have found the task of editing in this case painful indeed almost to the point of mental and bodily torture . . .') leads to passages which later consideration might have deleted,

> ... he (Jefferies) was never a man of the world, did not care in the least for money, and was too unworldly either to feather his nest or log-roll into public favour.

and again,

> I do not care much for long and portentous lists of acknowledgments of trivialities. It has always seemed to me that such lists are a kind of literary brag and snobbery. Essential help is another matter and there are four people to whom I must pay sincere tribute . . .

and the writer proceeds to thank several ladies and gentlemen whom he names for their parts in helping with the *Notebooks.* Surely other writers, with their lists, are only being courteous in like manner? And what is log-rolling? Is it friend appreciating the work of friend?

These slight blemishes (if blemishes they be) are the more noticeable because Mr. Looker has so much to tell of a factual nature thereby leaving the reader to his own opinions and feelings. When he records without comment, he is unexceptionable. Thus we learn why Edward Thomas was 'sometimes careless' as a biographer and editor of some of Jefferies' posthumous writings, in that he failed to collate supposedly new work with that already printed by Jefferies himself in his lifetime; and how Thomas was disliked by Mrs. Jefferies when in 1908 or so he called on her, telling her of his ideas of writing a biography of the Master. Apparently Thomas mentioned that he had visited some people, for information, whom Mrs. Jefferies included in her dislike, for

> "she practically refuses me any help" (wrote Thomas at the time) "and leaves important questions unanswered. Her son has R.J.'s notebooks, but she will not give me his address in order that I might apply for them".

And skilfully, Mr. Looker makes no comment. Later, the notebooks came into his own possession, from Jefferies' son in Canada. All Jefferies' lovers will want to possess these Notebooks.

Then there is Mr. Looker's assembly, entitled *Chronicles of the Hedges,* which is work of the secondary Jefferies, the journalist using the material of his observations fairly quickly—new wine in new bottles, not left to mature, owing to "hard necessity". By far the best of the trio is *The Old House at Coate,* an entirely new book, which is indeed a find. It is Jefferies at his best; equal, in many respects, to the famous *Story of my Heart;* it is even the complement of that famous book. In another edition, the meticulous Mr. Looker might consider omitting the numerical indications of Jefferies' re-visions. They interfere with the reading slightly. The book's the thing. Should the reader be told that *not* was changed to *but; copse* to *wood; labourers* to *haymakers; the petals* to *a -petal:* while words in the text, such as *yet, and, for,* et cetera, were "struck out"? The final version as Jefferies left it is really all that the reader requires. The test is. Would Jefferies have printed the book with his own omissions and alterations recorded at the back of the book, behind the scenes as it were?

H.W.