TALK GIVEN TO THE RICHARD JEFFERIES SOCIETY BY THE PRESIDENT, PROF. W.J. KEITH, Pd.D., M.A.
on June 7th 1976 at Swindon.

EDWARD THOMAS, RICHARD JEFFERIES, AND WILTSHIRE

Soon after Edward Thomas was commissioned to write his biography of Jefferies, he told his friend Jesse Berridge that he and Helen planned to take a short holiday at Coate "where [Jefferies] was born and lived 30 years, though I have already known it 20 years myself."[1] By good fortune, his paternal grandmother, an uncle and an aunt had all lived in Swindon when he was a child, and Thomas spent numerous holidays here in his boyhood. The family lived, according to Mrs Gay, in Cambria Place.[2] His aunt worked in a refreshment bar at the station; his uncle as a fitter in the Great Western Railway works (he left, and emigrated to South Africa, only two or three years before the young Alfred Williams, who was only a year older than Thomas, entered the works at the age of fifteen in 1892). In his autobiographical memoir, published posthumously as *The Childhood of Edward Thomas*, we hear of his intense excitement at going to visit his Swindon relatives: "It was delicious to pass Wantage, Challow, Uffington, Shrivenham, to see the 75th, 76th mile marks by the railway side, to slow down at last to the cry of 'Swindon' and see my grandmother, my uncle or my aunt waiting."[3] Indeed, Swindon has the distinction of being the subject of what seems to be Thomas's first surviving piece of literary composition. He recalls being given a notebook at the age of eight or nine, and in it, he tells us, "I pronounced the houses of Swindon to be 'like bull-dogs, small but strongly built'."[4] Those words must have been written, it is interesting to note, about the time that Jefferies was dying at Goring.

At first, while still a very small boy, Thomas's rambles were confined to week-end walks with his uncle along the banks of the canal, occasional fishing, and the doubtful pleasure of watching the railway-workers hunt water-rats with terriers or, worse, pelt them with stones (*CET*,50). The visits were frequent, however, and, at one point he even "spent the greater part of a summer term in a. Board-school in Swindon where the head master was a friend of [his] father's" and Thomas "became a Wiltshire boy in accent" (*CET*, 63). This gave him the opportunity to venture further afield. One occasion when, at the age of thirteen or so, he was taken by other boys to peer through a broken door into the slaughter-house, which backed on to the canal, made a deep impression upon him (*CET*,90). Another schoolboy pastime was called "foxing" and consisted of "following, up lovers in our meadows and lurking behind hedges to watch-them" (*CET*,92). Trivial mischievousness, perhaps, but notice how the meadows have become "our-meadows." Thomas is now a self-naturalized Wiltshireman—and remained so for the rest of his life.

He writes in more extended detail of a later visit, and here we can catch a fascinating glimpse of future development:

> I gave more time to butterflies in those weeks because I had now made friends with a Swindon boy who was very little of a fisherman. We chased the butterflies;

> we jumped the narrow brooks; we trespassed hither and thither with a St. Bernard puppy who drew after us all the cattle in the fields and provoked the farmer; we sat talking in the crown of a pollard willow. Fred was something of an athlete and we ran and jumped in friendly rivalry in the fields. I could beat; him only at walking. I never met the boy of anything like my own age whom I could not beat at walking. So I stamped the dust furiously from one milestone to another towards Wootton Bassett in the horse of some day covering the mile in less than seven minutes. Also as I now had an old bicycle with me, we raced on bicycles. (*CET*,127)

That sounds interestingly close to the carefree childhood of Bevis and Mark, though Thomas may not have been aware of the connection since it is by no means certain that he had encountered Jefferies at this time. The earliest we hear of acquaintance with his later literary hero occurs in the following reference from the essay "How I Began": "By the time I was fourteen or fifteen, … I kept a more or less daily record of notable events, the finding of birds' nests, the catching of moles or fish, the skinning of a stoat, the reading of Richard Jefferies and the naturalists" (*LS*,17)

Thomas is naturally rather vague about dates in his early recollections, but it appears to have been at about the age of fifteen that a climactic moment in his life came with the reading of Jefferies. Once again, it is necessary to quote at length:

> I read books of travel, sport and natural history. I remember those of Waterton, Thomas Edward, Buckland, Wallace, Charles Kingsley, and above all Richard Jefferies. If 1 say little of Jefferies it is because not a year passed thereafter without copious draughts of him and I cannot pretend to distinguish amongst them. But very soon afterwards I was writing out in each of his books and elsewhere—as in a cousin's album—when I had the opportunity, those last words of *The Amateur Poacher:* 'Let us get out of these indoor narrow modern days, whose twelve hours somehow have become shortened, into the sunlight and the pure wind. A something that the ancients called divine can be found and felt there still.' They were a gospel, an incantation. What I liked in the books was the freer open-air life, the spice of illegality and daring, roguish characters—the opportunities so exceeding my own, the gun, the great pond, the country home, the apparently endless leisure—the glorious moments that one could always recapture by opening the *Poacher*—and the tinge of sadness here and there as in the picture of the old moucher perishing in his sleep by the lime kiln, and the heron flying over in the morning indifferent. Obviously Jefferies had lived a very different boyhood from ours, yet one which we longed for and supposed ourselves fit for. (*CET*,134-5)

And, a little later: "No book read at school was to me ever anything like as delightful as *The Amateur Poacher"* (*CET*,136).

Thomas, we should remember, was a Londoner and these tastes were unusual. At St. Paul's School, which, he attended between 1894 and 1895, his fellow-students were expected to read and discuss the officially-sanctioned writers of the day—he mentions Maupassant and Meredith. Thomas, to them, must- have seemed idiosyncratic and eccentric in his reading tastes:

> I continued to read chiefly Jefferies and the naturalists, whom these boys knew nothing of. 'What are .you reading, Thomas?' asked one of the boys who already wore a scholar's gown. '*The Gamekeeper at Home*,' said I. 'The gamekeeper's place is the woods,' said he. And I kept silence, -not venturing to remark' that the woods were his home. (*CET*,141-2)

On the flyleaf of his algebra book he wrote ("in the worst possible Latin," as ho records), "I love birds more than books" (*CET*, 14-3) — but" Jefferies' books were exceptions to the rule. And Thomas's place, like the gamekeeper's, was also the woods. By this time he had already met—appropriately, while fishing—David ("Dad") Uzzell, a local "character" closer to an amateur poacher than to a Gamekeeper at home, with whom he corresponded until his death—at which time Uzzell wrote a letter of condolence to Helen Thomas that is one of the most moving human documents I know.

In 1895, immediately upon leaving school, Thomas made an extended visit to Swindon. By this time he was keeping a naturalist's diary, and this was later published in his first book, *The Woodland Life,* which appeared in 1897 (when, be it noted, he was still only nineteen). He began by walking from London to Marlborough Forest on foot, and, with the exception of a week spent at Clifton, he lived for three months in the Swindon area. The following extract, not representative because most of the diary consists of natural history observations, gives some indication of his interests at this time. He is writing of Coate Reservoir:

> May 31. Hither, on a summer's day, the keepers stroll and chat with the fishers, and talk of the pheasants that do well this year. The keepers are from Burderop on the hill—great woods of oak and ash and lesser larches, with violet and windflower and primrose in spring—in whose midst is the low dormer-windowed cottage of Richard Jefferies' 'gamekeeper,' overbrowed by walnut trees, whose fruit the old keeper used lately to give the boys of the countryside.
>
> June 1. Opposite the old house of Richard Jefferies, on the Coate Road just beyond the stile which leads a path aside to the reservoir, I met an old dame who had lived there in the old low house since a time considerably before the .birth of Jefferies. She talked willingly of Jefferies; of his wanderings at all hours and on every side: and of the fact that she, in her younger days, prepared the single-windowed cheese-room at Coate Farm for use as his study.[5]

This last observation, by the way, is of doubtful accuracy. When I first encountered it, I wrote to Mrs Gay on the subject and received a characteristic, "common-sense" reply: "That I think was not his writing room. How could it be when Mrs. Jefferies was still making cheese and would need it?"[6] Later in the diary, Thomas speaks of a summer-house at the rear of Coate Farm "built by Richard Jefferies alone with his own hands" (*WL*,223). This, too, is questionable. One must remember that Thomas was very young (17) at this time, probably gullible, possibly a romancer. But Jefferies and the Jefferies country are clearly at the centre of his life and interests.

In the following year, 1896, Thomas paid yet another lengthy visit to Swindon, between February 15 and March 28. This is also recorded in *The Woodland Life*, and it was during this visit that Thomas wrote an article

entitled “In the Footsteps of Richard Jefferies,” published in the *New Age* (under his full name, Philip Edward Thomas) on April 2. This was the essay that I stumbled upon some eighteen months ago, parts of which, I understand, were read by Cyril Wright at a meeting of this Society in January.

At this point, however, we must retrace our steps a little. It was two years earlier, in the summer of 1894, that Thomas had been invited to the home of James Ashcroft Noble, a minor journalist and literary critic, to discuss his early attempts at writing, and had there met his daughter, Helen Noble, who was later to become Thomas’s wife. By 1896 they were close friends. Helen records in her memoir *As It Was*: “During his absence in Wiltshire David [as Edward is invariably called there] sent me boxes of wild flowers, and a thrush’s egg—the first he had found.”[7] (This period of their relationship was shadowed by the serious illness of her father, who in fact died within a day or two of Thomas’s return to London.)

Later, Jefferies and the Jefferies country were to play important parts in the development of their love for each other. Here, for example, is .an account so delicate in its intimacy that I hesitate to read it on this formal, public occasion, but my account would be incomplete without it:

> Sometimes we would go to Wimbledon Common. It was on one of these summer evenings we had been talking of Richard Jefferies and his love for the human body. We had .just read his essay, “Nature in the Louvre” and his description of the “Venus Accroupie”, which he had admired so much. We were sitting in the undergrowth of a little copse in a remote part of the common. David had said that he had never seen a woman’s body, and I do not remember quite how it came about, but I quite naturally and simply, without any feeling of shyness, knelt up in our secret bower and undid my clothes, and let them fall about my knees so that to the knees I was naked. I knew my body was pretty: my breasts were firm and round and neither too small nor too large, and my neck and shoulders made a pleasant line, and my arms were rounded and white, and, though my hips were small, the line of the waist was lovely. I was proud of my body, and took the most innocent pleasure in its lines and health and strength. So we knelt in the grass and dead leaves of the copse opposite to each other, he silent and I laughing with joy to feel the air on my skin, and to see his enraptured gaze. For as he knelt he gazed wonder-struck and almost adoring, quite still, quite silent-, looking now and then into my eyes with serious ecstatic look, his eyes full of tenderness and love, searching mine for any sign of regret or shyness. He did not touch me, but just knelt there letting his eyes take their fill of the beauty that was filling his soul with delight. When, without a word, I lifted my clothes about me, he helping me, he only then said, “Jenny, I did not know there was such beauty.” (*HT*,33-34)

Dates at this point are difficult to establish with any accuracy. Different biographers give slightly different versions, but it was probably in September 1897, just before Thomas’s going up to Oxford, that he and Helen spent what she calls “a tiny honeymoon” (*HT*,43)—though in fact they were not yet married— in the Swindon area. They stayed, in Helen’s words, “in the cottage of his old gamekeeper friend,” and her description evokes for anyone familiar with the Jefferies country the gamekeeper’s cottage at Hodson Bottom:

> It stood like a fairy-tale cottage right in a wood, and quite off the road, a track from the lane taking you to it. It had a deep thatched roof almost hiding the little windows of the bedrooms with its deep eaves, and a porch with a little bench on each side, covered with traveller's joy and briar roses that filled the air with their mushy scent. It belonged to the wood, and the wood to it, as if it had been in reality the brown fur-covered creature that it looked, whose eyes peered out from under its overhanging brows shyly and kindly. (*HT*,44)

William Cooke, in his recent biography of Thomas,[8] follows earlier commentators in identifying the gamekeeper with Dad Uzzell, presumably because Helen refers to him as "Dad," but this seems incorrect. Uzzell was never gamekeeper in Hodson Bottom (from what we know of him, it would—to say the least—have been an eccentric choice), so either they didn't stay with the Uzzells or they didn't stay at Hodson. Mrs Gay investigated the matter in some detail, and I fully accept her conclusions: that Helen herself muddled the gamekeeper and the ex-poacher, and that the two of them spent their blissful two or three days in the cottage once inhabited by Jefferies' keeper Haylock.

Edward and Helen were married in 1899, and the next few years can be passed over in silence here. Edward went to Oxford, the three children were born, and he embarked on his precarious career as free-lancing reviewer, journalist and writer. His rambles took him from time to time back into Wiltshire, but his connections with the county were irregular until April 1907 when we first hear of the projected "life & criticism of Richard Jefferies" (*LGB*,136-7). A contract was signed with Hutchinson's shortly afterwards, and it is interesting to note that Thomas was allowed more time than usual to produce a complete manuscript. None the less, he had only a year to write a long, detailed book requiring a great deal of painstaking and time-consuming research. He therefore set to work quickly, visited Mrs Jefferies in late June ("but she had callers & I didn't get ahead much" [*LGB*,14-5]) , and again in mid-August. He also arranged an interview with C.J. Longman, who had been a sympathetic mentor to Jefferies in the 1880s and helped to see much of his work into print.

By the end of the summer Thomas was back in Swindon in search of background material. He spent three weeks in the area, during which he stayed at Broome Farm, and he describes the visit in a letter to the poet Gordon Bottomley: "I was nearly always out of doors & when indoors I was writing out my notes or writing to crowds of people who were supposed to be likely to help me to know Jefferies" *(LGB*,146). Unlike so many of his commissions for book-writing, this was one that Thomas found congenial, and despite the tinge of irony in that statement it is clear that he took his assignment seriously. At first he seems to have been afraid that he would be unable to uncover any new information (Mrs Jefferies had informed him that she had told all she knew to Walter Besant), but he soon found that this was by no means the case: "I met one or two good people—one splendid old woman—..& altogether I have a mass of trifles that are new & will have some effect" (*LGB*,146). The "splendid old woman" may well have been the original of "Molly the Milkmaid" in *The Amateur Poacher* (who is presumably

equatable with Polly the dairymaid in *Bevis*), for Thomas writes in the biography:

> That he [Jefferies as a boy] fitted up one of the craft on the Reservoir with sails is certain; for I have met 'Molly the Milkmaid,' who stitched them after he had cut them to the right shape. ... 'Molly' did many things for him, and remembers driving a two-pronged, fork through an eel that she might skin it alive at his request, for he had never seen, that rite before.

And there are other hints in the book that show how Thomas had made local contacts with people who knew Jefferies: "All that I could learn from one who was with him on the *North Wilts Herald* was that the staff once signed a roundrobin against his handwriting" (*RJ*,62). One touching reminiscence, that Thomas obviously gathered from first-hand, is that of a woman who remembered encountering Jefferies on the Downs when she was still a little girl: "There was a child who, venturing up to this odd-looking solitary, heard exciting talk from him of birds and beasts, and found him there again and again, staying with him till the nurse called her away from the 'tramp'." (*RJ*, 78)

But Thomas drew his information from local records as well as from personal recollections. He told W.H. Hudson: "I have been spending my time on the downs and with Chiseldon Parish records. ... In the eighteenth century Coate and Badbury and Chiseldon swarmed with married men and women named Jefferies, who produced boys and girls regularly, and so far I can't see which of them Jefferies came from."[10] Fortunately, between this time and the completion of his book, the article by Jefferies' cousin Fanny Hall, entitled "The Forbears of Richard Jefferies," appeared in *Country Life* (March 1908) under the pseudonym "Jefferies Luckett," and -Thomas was able to benefit from the information given there.

The visit was not wholly dedicated to "research," however. Helen spent two of the three weeks with him, and her description of it is warm and moving:

> The fortnight we spent in Wiltshire was one of the happiest times of my life, and one of the few holidays of any length which David and I had alone together. We walked all day long, and Liddington Castle—an old British camp above Swindon— Wayland Smith's Cave, and the White Horse of [Uffington— Helen miscalls it "Effingham"] became as familiar to me as our bare- hillside in Hampshire. We stayed at a farm house some miles from Swindon, but often, when we had wandered too far afield to return the same day, put up for the night at a wayside inn, where once we arrived so soaking wet that we had to go to bed while our clothes were dried. ...
> ... In Wiltshire with its stone-built villages, its great barns like temples built to Demeter, its ancient and noble manor houses, with its guardian elms and rich red fallow, its meadows along the banks of Avon, its flocks and herds feeding as from, time immemorial on the downs, its teams of farm horses often silhouetted on the skyline of the hills, its peasants toiling at their ancient craft in ancient traditional ways, I felt that I was at the very heart of England's being. ...
> ... Savernake Forest, Marlborough, Malmesbury, Shaftesbury, Amesbury, Devizes, Westbury and Bradford-on-Avon are some of the places I particularly remember we included in the wide area we traversed, and of course the special

> places connected with Jefferies. Many of the days stand out clear in my mind today—.the ways we went, the things we saw, and even the words we spoke, so happy was I during this our longest holiday together. (I,126, 127, 128)

None the less, for Thomas it was work—hard work, notwithstanding the fact that it was considerably more congenial than most of the hack-writing he was forced to undertake to earn his bread and butter. By the end of the year he had accumulated sufficient material (much of it at the British Museum) to get down to an extended bout of writing. For this he needed privacy and freedom from distraction—even from Helen and the children; by good fortune, his friend Harry Hooton succeeded in finding him a cottage at Minsmere on the Suffolk coast (a birdwatcher's paradise, by the way) where he could—at least theoretically—work in peace. He tells Bottomley that in ten days in January 1908 he wrote 40,000 words. A long passage on the difficulties he encountered in writing the book is worth quoting:

> The first chapter at present is a long, too poetical (where it isn't too dull) chapter on Jefferies' Wiltshire. Then genealogical stuff & ancestors. Then the farmhouse & parents & childhood. Then the big boy & country journalist writing [short?] stories & very competent journalistic articles on agriculture &c.
>
> There are prodigiously dull blocks in the thing, because you see nobody has done the thing completely or attempted it, & the scale asked for made completeness necessary. So I give the main points or even the 2nd rate stuff. (*LGB*,153)

For all his modesty and self-criticism, he knows the significance of what he is doing – "nobody has done the thing completely."

Characteristically, however, Thomas's initial energy and enthusiasm soon gave way to doubts and dissatisfactions. Three weeks later (February 1908) he is complaining that he has become "just a machine for turning out lengths of Jefferies almost every day" (*LGB*,155), and in another three weeks, when he is close to finishing the first draft, he continues in his self-deprecating manner: "The book is not, cannot be organic. It may have a lot of small lights, but no light on the whole man. Trying to mingle biography, criticism & mere exposition of his matter, I have made confusion" (*LGB*,159). One should not, though, lay too much stress on this hypercritical attitude to his work. Anyone who has read through Thomas's letters knows that he always reacted in this way when discussing any books in progress; it was part of his temperament, the mask that he assumed when facing his friends and the world. But beneath this mask, we can see another side of Thomas, one determined to communicate what he calls his "special claims" for Jefferies (*LGB*,156), and it comes through in his attitude to Walter Besant's earlier *Eulogy*. At the beginning of his research, he had referred to "Besant's excellent advertisement" (*LGB*,137) which may or may not conceal a vein of irony, but before long he talks of Besant's account as "perfunctorily arranged" and comes to realise that "Besant missed a hundred touches of character."[11] By the time he gets round to solid writing, his response is critical indeed. He writes to Bottomley: "I simply ignore Besant, tho my chances of controverting him with security, of pointing out his indolence his incompetence & his inaccuracy are many; not to speak of his pervasive

vulgarity" (*LGB*,154). While we should acknowledge the fact that Besant wrote the book: for the charitable purpose of making money for Jefferies' widow and family, I must state—as one who has, as it were, followed in both Besant's and Thomas's footsteps—that Thomas is absolutely right. It reminds us that Thomas. was a brilliant literary critic with the highest standards; he knew that his own work fell short of perfection, but was well aware of its superiority to its predecessors.

I have said that at the cottage at Minsmere he could work "at least theoretically" in peace. In fact, he got into an emotional tangle with a young girl of seventeen whom he met while walking on the beach. Coincidentally, she had connections with a family in whose home Helen had once lived as governess. The affair (if that is not too strong a term) was obviously innocent, idyllic and rather touching. Helen mentions it in *World Without End,* but got confused about dates and occasions, claiming that Thomas was writing his Swinburne book at the time. Thomas's letters, published much later, prove indisputably that Helen's memory was faulty on this point. I mention it here because readers of Helen's book may be unaware that this incident occurred while Thomas had Cicely Luckett, Felise Goring and Amaryllis Iden very much in the forefront of his mind (he admits in a letter to Bottomley about this time that he has "been in love with" Felise [*LGB*,171n]), and also because it is a clear instance of Helen's vagueness and so lends support to the belief that she was similarly- inaccurate in her account of Dad Uzzell and the gamekeeper's cottage.

None the less, it would be true to say that Thomas "broke the back" of his task while at Minsmere. By May 1908 he is "writing the last chapter of Jefferies or at least sketching it, & walking for a week about Sussex, Surrey & Kent" (*LGB*,163)— which seems to suggest that he was at one and the same time following in Jefferies' last footsteps [as many of us did last Saturday] and preparing for his next book, *The South Country*. In July the progress-report to Bottomley runs as follows: "I have just finished Jefferies (all but the index & preface), & have today & yesterday compiled a monstrous bibliography for those who come after me" (*LGB*,16p). At this point, perhaps I can be forgiven if I indulge in a little personal reminiscence. Exactly fifty years after Thomas wrote those words, I was myself engaged in going through his "monstrous bibliography," checking it, using it, adding to it, assessing it. Perhaps no one, with the obvious exception of your first president, Samuel J. Looker, has subjected this part of Thomas's work to such rigorous scrutiny, and I confess to feeling a sensation of warm and close fellowship when I read Thomas's words because I can count myself as one of "those who came after" him. And my verdict on its usefulness may be worth recording. Inevitably, I found a- few mistakes in it—slips of the pen, typographical errors, dates that are not quite right, etc. But I know, only too well, that if Thomas had not spent hours that were obviously uncongenial to him, in the interests of scholarly comprehensiveness and in tribute to Jefferies as one who deserved detailed scholarly, treatment, my own work would have taken much, much longer and would have been far less accurate. I was always aware, while working on my thesis, of 'Thomas's help and example, and if my own even more monstrous list of works by and about Jefferies in my *Critical Study* (itself not without its mistakes and

omissions) proves valuable to subsequent students of Jefferies, Edward Thomas deserves a vital part of the credit.

There is little more to tell about the writing of the biography. Gordon Bottomley agreed to read proofs, as he had done on a number of occasions for Thomas, and in the ensuing correspondence further light is shed upon Thomas's methods and problems. Bottomley wondered if he could give "a more organic account of the progress of affairs in Jefferies' family," but Thomas admits: "I know nothing about them. … It was not even possible to say that R.J. was a good husband & father with any certainty" (*LGB*,170). This observation backs up the persistent rumour that Thomas somehow failed to win the full co-operation of surviving members of the Jefferies family. In an unpublished letter, now in the Jefferies material at the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, Thomas told Dr. T.H. Rake that Mrs Jefferies thought him too young, and it is clear from a letter to Edward. Garnett, the influential contemporary critic who was an enthusiast for Jefferies and a great supporter of Thomas, Hudson and Alfred Williams, that she had not shown him some as-then-unpublished pages originally intended for *The Gamekeeper at Home* and *The Amateur Poacher* that he knew she possessed.[12] ' Moreover, we know that Jefferies' sister, 'Mrs. Billing, did not allow him to consult Jefferies' notebooks, then in her possession, because of "what seemed a rather domineering manner"[13]—a phrase so unlike what we know of Thomas's character that we can only suppose that a combination of nervousness and eagerness on his part led them to under-rate his ability and sincerity.

It is clear, too, that Bottornley was extremely helpful to Thomas with criticisms and. suggestions. At one point 'Thomas writes: "You are excellent. I adopt your suggestions shamelessly and with no intention of announcing to the world that you wrote the book" (*LGB*,173). That, of course, is part of Thomas's quiet, nervous humour—he makes a similar remark to Edward Garnett: "Very little but the expression is mine; … they are your ideas or the ramifications of them"[14]—but a further reference to Bottonley's discovery of "omissions &. inconsistencies" in the bibliography (*LGB*,175), discovered while reading the proofs, shows that his behind-the-scenes assistance was considerable.

The book was ultimately published on 26 January 1909 at 10s 6d (it appeared in an American version in September). Two years later (6 October 1911), it was reprinted in Hutchinson's 1/- Net Library [15]—at which point one can only remark: oh, inflation! The book was dedicated, appropriately, to W.H. Hudson. Thomas had written to Hudson as soon as the book was commissioned to secure permission, and they corresponded about Jefferies at this time, Thomas eager to get Hudson's opinion about earlier prose writers that Jefferies had read and quietly but firmly defending Jefferies against Hudson's charge that he lacked humour. Typically, Thomas's most critical account of the book was written to the man who had accented the dedication: "It seems wholly bad and full of sound and fury and my special brand of vagueness."[15]

A few months before publication, Thomas had written to Bottomley: "I wonder what people will say of a biographer who allows his subject to hold the field so" (*LGB*,171). The book was, in fact, well received—Thomas was

particularly pleased by a long and favourable review in *The Times* and by private praise from Henry S. Salt and Edward Garnett. On reading it, Garnett immediately asked him to reprint some of Jefferies' uncollected essays, a suggestion that resulted in *The Hills and the Vale*.But although the book seems to have been a *succès d'estime,* its financial rewards were modest at best. We find Thomas writing, rather ruefully, to Dad Uzzell in December 1909: "My book on Jefferies did not succeed as well as you might think by the praise it had, and I have not made my fortune yet."[16] None the less, it soon took its place as the standard biography of Jefferies and as such has yet to be superseded. It is, I suppose, in the nature of things that the book's highest praise came twenty years after Thomas's death, when Mrs Q.D. Leavis praised it as "a classic in critical biography, to stand with Lockhart's Scott and Mrs Gaskell's Brontë in point of intrinsic interest, and containing better literary criticism than many critical works." Interestingly enough, she commends it for the very reason that Thomas feared it might be criticised—for his "allowing the subject to hold the field so." In Mrs Leavis's words, "the author is recognized as being present only by the sympathy that informs the narrative and the intelligence that directs the criticism and determines the selections."[17]

That is an admirable critical statement, and I will not even attempt to emulate it. (The only point that seems worth adding is that, although current critical practice and fashion would claim that Thomas quotes too often and too long, much of the material was not readily available in Thomas's time, and the book performed an invaluable service in providing generous samples of Jefferies' writing as well as judicious commentary upon it.) Writing to Hudson about Besant's *Eulogy*, Thomas had observed: "I think Besant's book leaves such a bad flavour because it gives no idea of Jefferies' greatness and tremendous joy of life, and so allows the final sickness to dominate."[18]" Thomas certainly corrected the imbalance in his own work.

In closing, it remains for me to bring my subject full circle by documenting Thomas's love of Wiltshire in the years following the publication of the biography. His next book was *The South Country* which, although he assured his publishers that he would "scatter real place names plentifully" (*LGB*,165), in one of his elusive, unrooted books. None the less, Wiltshirc figures prominently, and a reference to Swindon and the old canal of his boyhood appears in the opening pages. And one of the more memorable passages depends for its inspiration upon Jefferies. He records how, at an unnamed town in Wiltshire close to the county boundary,

> it occurs to me that I should like to taste lardy cakes— which I last bought at Wroughton fifteen years ago-—before I leave the county. Richard Jefferies' grandfather was "My Lord Lardy Cake" in old Swindon sixty years ago, and his memory is kept alive by those tough, sweet slabs of larded pastry which, in his generous ovens, gathered, all the best essences of the other cakes, pies, tarts and .joints which were permitted to be baked with them. In "Amaryllis at the Fair" they are mentioned with some indignity as a ploughboy's delicacy. My lips water for them, and at the first bakery in --- I ask for some. The baker tells me he has sold the last one ... [and] stiffly tries to. persuade me that none of his fellow-townsmen bakes them. I disbelieve the man of dough for all his conscious look of sagacity and virtue, and am rewarded for my disbelief by four lardy cakes

> for threepence-halfpenny not many yards from his accursed threshold. Lardy cakes, I now discover for the first time, have this merit besides their excellent taste and provision of much pleasant but not finical labour for the teeth, that one is enough at a time, and that four will therefore, take a man a long way upon the roads of England. [19]

In 1911, he undertook his book on The Icknield Way (published in 1913) in which he follows the ancient British trackway from Thetford to Swindon. And at this point we encounter a new Thomas—and, perhaps, a new Wiltshire, though the unreliable, self-righteous baker has already offered a hint. Thomas had come along the Ridgeway from East Hendred, through Ashbury, Bishopstone and Wanborough, and eventually arrived, weary and hungry, at Chiseldon where he looked for a place to stay the night. And then, if we can believe an amused but irritated Thomas, his troubles began. He tried one inn and. then another, in vain. A further encounter is as grotesque as it is frustrating:

> An enormous woman stood wedged in the doorway; she was black-haired, sullen, and faintly moustached, and she had her hands hanging down because there was no room on either side of her to clasp them, and no room in the doorway for her to rest them upon the fat superincumbent upon her hips."[20]

She calls her husband, who "did not think he could spare me a bed." At another possible place there is no room, and he is then told that it was impossible, to get a bed that side of Swindon. He tries at Coate, but, again is turned away. At Swindon, at last, he is successful, though he paints a lugubrious picture of the bedroom decorations in which the dominating influence is a picture of "a swarthy and hearty woman practically naked to the waist' advertising cigarettes, though, as Thomas notes ruefully, "I could not imagine what she had to do with cigarettes of any kind" (*IW*, 308). Possibly, he speculated, "they were afraid of German spies at Chisledon" (*IW*,307). All in all, it has a prophetic intimtion of a sadder—and to us more familiar—world.

The outbreak of the First World War, of which this seems a palpable foreshadowing, gave the *coup de grace* to 'Thomas's precarious employment as a writer of descriptive, meditative prose, but at the same time it released the poetic impulse that had been dormant within him for so long. The last two and a half years of his life saw a remarkable poetic flowering; during this period, under the shadow of the war, he explored what England meant to him, and as one of his best editors and commentators has recently noted, "its heart and epitome is Wiltshire."[21] In one of his finest poems, "Lob," the spirit of England is personified as a Wiltshire countryman. The countryside in which he is set is somewhat south of here in the Pewsey Yale, the country around Alton Barnes and Alton Priors, but Lob himself seems to have been formed out of a composite of Dad Uzzell, the old game-keeper, and possibly even Jefferies himself, who had been described on the first page of the biography as "the genius, the human expression, of this country, emerging from it, not to be detached from it any more than the curves of some statues from their maternal stone" (*RJ*,1). In the poem Thomas recalls how

At hawthorn-time in Wiltshire travelling
In search of something chance would never bring, (11.1-2)

he meets an old man who, in memory, haunts him, so he goes back into the country in search of him. The people he meets all recognize his description, but their identifications of its subject are all different. At last he meets another memorable countryman, described as follows:

He was a squire's son
Who loved wild bird and beast, and dog and gun
For killing them. He had loved them from his birth,
One with another, as he loved the earth. (11.4-3-6)

This man gives him a long descriptive account of a recurring, unlying countryman, Lob, who contains within himself the spirit of the rural English. And the man sums him up as follows:

'Do you believe Jack dead before his hour?
Or that his name is Walker, or Bottlesford,
Or Button, a mere clown, or squire, or lord?
The man you saw,—Lob-lie-by-the-f ire , Jack Cade,
Jack Smith, Jack Moon, poor Jack of every trade,
Young Jack, or old Jack, or Jack What-d'ye-call,
Jack-in-the-hedge, or Robin-run-by-the-wall,
Robin Hood, Ragged Robin, lazy Bob,
One of the lords of No Man's Land, good Lob,—
Although he was seen dying at Waterloo,
Hastings, Agincourt, and Sedgemoor too,—
Lives yet. Me never will admit he is dead
Till millers cease to grind men's bones for bread,
Not till the weathercock crows once again
And I remove my house out of the lane
On to the road.' (11.130-14-5)

Thomas concludes (and I will conclude also) by drawing the inevitable connection:

With this he disappeared
In hazel and thorn tangled with old-man's-beard.
But one glimpse of his back, as there he stood,
Choosing his way, proved him of old Jack's blood,
Young Jack perhaps, and now a Wiltshireman
As he has oft been since his days began. (11.14-5-150)

Notes

1 R. George Thomas, ed. *Letters from Edward Thomas to Gordon Bottomley* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), p.141n. (The editor misreads "Corte" for "Coate" throughout.) Henceforth cited in text as *LGB*.

2 Frances J. Gay, "Poet who found glamour in Swindon scene," *Swindon Evening Advertiser* (8 April 1967).

3 *The Childhood of Edward Thomas* (London: Faber, 1938), p.4. Henceforth cited in text as *CET*
4 *The Last Sheaf* (London: Cape, 1928), p.16. Henceforth cited in text as *LS*.
5 *The Woodland Life* (Second edition. Edinburgh and London: Blackv;ood, 1897), pp. 177-8. Henceforth cited in text as *WL*.
6 Letter from Frances J. Gay to W. J. Keith, 7 May 1967.
7 Helen Thomas, *As It Was and World Without End* (London: Faber, 1956), p. 26. Henceforth cited in text as *HT*.
8 William Cooke, *Edward Thomas: A Critical Biography* (London: Faber, 1970
9 *Richard Jefferies; His Life and Work* (London: Hutchinson, 1909), p.40. Henceforth cited in text as *RJ*.
10 James Guthrie, ed.,"Edward Thomas's letters to W. H. Hudson," *London Mercury*, 2 August 1920), 435.
11 *ibid.*
12 Edward Garnett, ed. "Some Letters of Edward Thomas," *Athenaeum* (16 April 1920), 502.
13 Samuel J. Looker and Chrichton Porteous, Richard Jefferies: Man of the Fields (London: Baker, 1965), p.xi.
14 Guthrie, *loc. cit.* 502.
15 Guthrie, *loc. cit.* 437.
16 John Moore, *The Life and Letters of Edward Thomas* (London: Heinemann, 1939), p. 154
17 Q. D. Leavis, "Lives and Works of Richard Jeffecries," in F. R. Leavis, ed., *A Selection from "Scrutiny*", (2 vols. Cambridge University Press, 1968), II, 203.
18 Guthrie, *loc. cit.* 435.
19 *The South Country* (London: Dent, 1909), pp.245-6.
20 *The Icknield Way* (London: Constable, 1913), pp.304-5. Henceforth cited in text as *IW*.
21 Edward Thomas, *Poems and Last Poems*, edited by Edna Longley (London: Collins, 1973), p.232. I am indebted to this source for the connection between "Lob" and the passage from RJ quoted below. The Quotations from "Lob" are also taken from this edition (pp.68-72).