"WOOD NOTES WILD": Trees and Woods in Jefferies' Imagination

Kim Taplin presented this talk at the Richard Jefferies Centenary Commemorative weekend, Arts Centre, Swindon on 31st July 1987.

In September 1881 Jefferies jotted "Wood Notes Wild" in his notebook as a projected title. I have borrowed the much-used but still enigmatic phrase for the title of this talk because it is apt for the activity of Jefferies' own imagination, especially in view of his sense of the primal importance of trees.

It comes, of course, from Milton's tribute in *L'Allegro* to 'Sweetest Shakespeare, Fancy's child' where the votaries of cheerfulness are urged to go to plays, either by the learned Jonson or to hear Shakespeare 'Warble his native wood-notes wild.'

Milton knew quite well what Shakespeare had read and thought and that he was no rustic. He was merely describing admiringly a mind in which the imagination is paramount: Shakespeare never writes to a thesis, whereas Milton and Jonson do. I believe the description to be without patronage; and also that it can be applied to the whole of Shakespeare's work because it is true in essence. But given the contest Milton clearly has Shakespeare's rural comedies especially in mind. The whole drift of *L'Allegro* calls for comedy: the adjacent .

phrase "Jonson's...sock" is a trope for the comic stage (as opposed to the buskin or high-soled boot which stands for the tragic); and the epithet "wood-" inescapably recalls *As You Like It, A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the Herne-haunted woods of *The Merry Wives of Windsor,* that most "native" of all Shakespeare's plays.

I crave your patience: this has more to do with Jefferies than may appear, but seeking signs of the shaping imagination requires more woodcraft than tracking the elusive red deer, when as Jefferies says you can sense the presence all around but rarely catch a glimpse. Almost, it is a search for the immortals Jefferies never entirely despaired of meeting, especially in the woods.

First, then, Jefferies' imagination, like Shakespeare's, was by no means innocent of literature; it took what it needed and fed on it, just as Bevis's did. No-one could lead a more out-door, firsthand life than Bevis, and yet it is inspired and shot through with make-believe. Mere matter remains "stupid", to use a favourite word of Bevis's, unless imagination fires it, and literature is one of the fuels of the imagination. No-one is more out-door and first-hand in writing of the rural scene than Jefferies; and this is true whether we look at passages of natural observation or those that show a working knowledge of country life and labour. In taking us *Round About a Great Estate* Jefferies begins with the trees, and here we have both kinds of writing interwoven: he jointly celebrates, in minute detail, the beauty of the trees and the operations of the woodman - including, characteristically, the pleasures of felling. But one difference between Jefferies and a *bona fide* woodman is that Jefferies has read *As You Like It* and the ballads of the greenwood and made them part of himself. He frequently makes mention of Rosalind, or Titania, or Robin Hood, and others less well-known, like Joscelin the forester in Scott's *Woodstock;* and they are present in his woods

even when he does not. His words are real and not literary, but part of the reality of English words in that they are steeped in history, literature and legend.

When Martial talks to Felise in Godwin's garden in *The Dewy Morn* his topic - theatrical productions - may seem a curious one. Jefferies impatience with showing a credible, consistent social background (or his incompetence in it - I can never quite decide which) means we often receive slight shocks in his fiction. He makes no bones about using Martial as the mouthpiece for his own opinion. We might expect the lovers to speak of nature, which is their context and the topic consonant with their relationship. Felise in fact hardly hears Martial's words anyway, but only their vibration, in which (significantly) she finds "all that she had once found in her solitary communings among the woods". But Martial is enthusiastic on a subject that clearly interested Jefferies too - he believes that Shakespeare is better presented without scenery, "...the words are enough;" says Martial, "and as you listen, lo! the bare planks of the platform fade away, and the depth of the green forest comes." For example. Or "two mighty monarchies" sundered by "the perilous narrow ocean"; or a blasted heath: or the cliffs near Dover? No: for Jefferies, as, I think, for Milton when banishing "loathed Melancoly" was in question, it is "the depth of the green forest". And, too, in an age when the stages were as over-furnished as the stifling drawing-rooms, Jefferies is pleading for the free encounter of Shakespeare and his audience. It is for the same reason that he urges the free encounter of the human spirit with the greenwood, to nourish the vital exercise of the imagination.

This seems to me to be a central theme in *The Dewy Morn.* The book is full of Jefferies' best and most passionate insight; and, despite the fact that it shows love triumphant without excessive suffering, it has plenty of hard edge. I have to admit to being long put off by the title. But then I had been out in very few dewy morns, and never <u>really seen</u> one. Doing that makes one more open to Jefferies. He really means what he says when he tells us to close our books and get outside. For the sophisticated person the temptation is always to become indoor end second-hand, to adopt and then subsequently to condemn as escapist a pastoral convention - as though <u>that</u> were all Nature amounted to. Jefferies doesn't require us to burn our books; only not to let them become a substitute for life. Wordsworth had said much the same thing. And of course there is so much that books can't tell you. "The shadows of the trees in the wood, why are they blue?" asks Jefferies in ' "Ought they not to be dark? Is it really blue, or an illusion? And what is their colour when you see the shadow of a tall trunk aslant in the air like a leaning pillar?" These are the kinds of things he wanted to know.

Goring's house in *The Dewy Morn* is Beechknoll and Iden's in *Amaryllis* is Coombe <u>Oaks,</u> and both Goring and Iden are noted for their tree-planting. Both create a potential Eden with their trees, and on both - to different degrees - the fallen world intrudes. When Goring realises that his way of life means that he now has neither the money nor the status to save an elderly couple from eviction, he is stricken:

> in the midst of his peaceful trees he was powerless. . .he thought he had shut out the world behind his trees... Now he found he had not done so. . .Meditating thus... his trees appeared but timber.

The same dilemma is urged more bitterly still in *Amaryllis* where Iden "had gone to such trouble to render the homestead beautiful with trees" and yet is sorely troubled with debt and misunderstood even by his wife.

When Goring's trees appeared to him "but timber", he was momentarily giving in to despair and negating the saving power of the imagination. He became for that brief, disheartened time like Godwin, who Jefferies has set at the opposite pole, characterised once again by his attitude to trees:

> He measured trees, and put a red mark against those to be felled, so many every year; they were timber - wood; they were hard, oak some of them; he could tell the cubical contents, and how many feet of planking they would saw up into. The shape of the oak, the shadow, the birds who came into it, all its varied associations — its dream — had no meaning to him. . .Through the woods in spring-time his feet waded among pools, broad lakes of azure-purple, acres upon acres of blue-bells, so crowed they could not swing; he crushed the tender anemone; he passed the white June rose.

And Godwin never plants:

> In that garden nothing had been planted afresh for generations the boughs fell away with age, and no new spray grew to fill the interstice, till by degrees there was not much left beyond the trunks, stark and sere-tipped.

Whether the psycho-pathology of this character is accurate in all points I have no idea. I can recognise the central trait. The portrait of the man without imagination hopelessly obsessed is very terrible, and Jefferies writes with an assurance that suggests a real-life original. Godwin's character is no mere schematic postulate, but a felt horror. I would guess that Jefferies' nature was such that failure of understanding, of communication, hurt him intolerably. And Godwin is unreachable. Yet he is not portrayed as a villain. Jefferies does not moralise, any more than the New Testament moralises instead he has a gospel in which imagination is paramount because imagination alone is deathless.

It is worth noticing in passing that old Abner and Squire Cornleigh are intermediate cases. Abner has our sympathy in that he has planted trees, for beauty and use, and is now to be turned out. It is one of Jefferies' frequent protests that under the tied cottage system people cannot plant for their own posterity or even enjoy the fruits of their planting during their own lifetime. Nevertheless Abner's incomprehension of Felise's efforts on his behalf to the extent of actually blaming her - "hur would keep on, talk, talk, talk" - is very painful. As for Cornleigh, of course we are angered by his imperviousness. Yet Jefferies' description of his single chosen habit (as opposed to the motions he goes through mechanically as a pillar of society)

is uncensorious. He is shown as insisting on standing, at regular intervals, under an oak, for no apparent reason.

> Enclosed within its thick bark the oak was passive to the beauty of the summer hours. As unobservant as the oak it seemed that the man, enclosed in a thick bark of indifference, was passive as the timber, he neither saw nor heard... simply existing.

Certainly indifference is reprehensible. And yet in 'Meadow Thoughts' Jefferies said of the countryside that you needed to be in it "like the oaks" to know it. There is perhaps just a shred of envy from one who was hyper-sensitive of the ability to be thick-skinned. Jefferies reserves his real bitterness for society and for Cornleigh's wife, its active agent. We see her only at a distance, beyond the reach of Jefferies' charitable understanding. A characteristic act of hers was to have some fine old elms cut down and a wall built in their place.

If it was to some extent the painfulness of human contact that led Jefferies to nature, he nonetheless recognised it at a positive resource - a source', in fact. - and not a mere escape. He actively proselytises for what has sustained him. À propos of a gypsy, he observes in *Just Before Winter* that it is strange to be without a Deity. "Like the trees, he is simply indifferent...That can only be seen under an English sky, under English oaks and beeches", he asserts - as though believing there was that in the trees that inculcate self-sufficiency. In *Wood Magic* the child Bevis is instructed directly by nature: and later, in *Bevis, the Story of a Boy,* he receives more intangible, more spiritual intimations in the dreamy interludes of his adolescence, often when he lies under a tree or when he becomes still like a tree. In some respects the book is Jefferies' equivalent of Wordsworth's *Prelude.* In *The Dewy Morn*, once again, Jefferies develops his ideal of the perfectly attuned nature developing inside the healthy body which results from proper education - in freedom, in the open air, in the country, and especially in being able "to feel the influence of deep shady woods, mile-deep in boughs". Such is his heroine Felise. She is by far the least credible character in the book, and we have to be carried along, if we are, by Jefferies' infectious enthusiasm for his idea. Her education too is very Wordsworthian:

> She listened to the wind in the trees and began herself to sing. The child was led along by unknown impulses, as if voices issued from the woods calling her to enter.

"To sing" suggests more than mere warbling. There is a high simplicity in Jefferies' prose here that invites a wider and deeper meaning to be found, such as "making the kind of response appropriate for a healthy human spirit to a beautiful environment" - if you'll forgive such heavy-footed spelling-out. "It will be long before education drives the natural love of woods out of children's hearts", Jefferies says in 'Summer in Somerset'. An optimistic moment emphasises the irony that what passes for education runs clean counter to what he believes. It is a common theme in the

nineteenth century that education starves and stifles the imagination. Jefferies' is a voice in a chorus that contains Wordsworth's resigned complaints of the "prison-house" that encloses the "growing boy" and Dickens's indictment of Gradgrindery.

But Jefferies' "wood-notes", his urgent and inspiriting plea for an out-door alternative, emerges in a solo that is, so far as I know, unmatched.

Not that Jefferies offers anything like a social programme, or even a coherent theory on which such a programme might be based. The nearest he comes to it is in the occasional flourish of a wish like that in 'A King of Acres' that factory workers might spend an hour under an oak. The passage is full of interest, though it is marred by its rhetorical structure:

> This ancient oak, whose thick bark, like cast-iron for ruggedness at the base, has grown on steadily ever since the last deer bounced beneath it, utterly heedless of the noisy rattle of machinery in the northern cities, unmoved by any shriek of engine, or hum, or flapping of loose belting, or any volume of smoke drifting into the air -I wish that the men now serving the great polished wheels, and works in iron and steel and brass could somehow be spared an hour to sit under this ancient oak in Thardover South Wood, and come to know from the actual touch of its rugged bark that the past is living now, that Time is no older, that Nature still exists as full as ever, and to see that all the factories of the world have made no difference, and therefore not to pin their faith to any theory born and sprung up among the crush and pale-faced life of modern time; but to look for themselves at the rugged oak bark, and up to the sky above the highest branches, and to take an acorn and consider its story and possibilities, and to watch the sly squirrel coming down, as they sit quietly, to play almost at their feet. That they might gather to themselves some of the leaves — mental and spiritual leaves - of the ancient forest, feeling nearer to the truth and soul, as it were, that lives on in it. They would feel as if they had got back to their original existence, and had become themselves, as they ought to be, could they live such life, untouched by artificial care.

Jefferies wants to show us the world of the forest over against the world of the factory, or indeed over against "the world" in the Biblical sense altogether: but he obscures his point by dragging in the unfortunate steel-workers, secure in the knowledge that there is no chance at all of their being "spared", and naively blind to the fact that even if paternalistic mill-owners were to despatch them by the train-load they would be unlikely to receive the wisdom, that comes to the educated sensibility of a Jefferies. If any did, would he be likely to return to work when his hour was up, secure in the faith that his factory, contrary to appearances, <u>makes no difference?</u>

You may feel I am unnecessarily labouring a quarrel with what may well have been a hastily-written piece. I wouldn't do it if I didn't feel both that Jefferies often lays himself open to misinterpretation in such ways and because I believe that the thoughts he is trying to strike out are vitally worthy of attention. There <u>is</u> that to which factories and all that goes under

the heading of “civilisation” “make no difference”, and it is that which is Jefferies’ most important topic. In fact, since everything he wrote in some way serves it, and since it serves as a self—imposed measure of the truthfulness of all he wrote, it could be said to be his only topic. I am speaking of the realm of the spirit. This is the place in which Jefferies could “become himself”; conversely, what he meant by “becoming himself” was entering that realm. For Jefferies its physical gate was countryside as little touched by the hand of man as possible. I say this in the realisation that this kind of talk is “to the Greeks foolishness” and that even to many of this audience it may seem a tiresome irrelevance. There may well be those here who think more highly of the Jefferies who knew how to handle a gun. or who value above all the hard edge of ‘One of the New Voters’, or those, perhaps the majority, who delight chiefly in how painstakingly and how poetically (pacé Dr.Johnson) he numbers the streaks of things. I was, and still am, one of these last: and I still find *The Story of My Heart* distasteful in many ways. Its egoism sorts so ill with the world it speaks of. Nevertheless I believe it is there we have to look to help us interpret the seminal thoughts which are latent or-cryptically expressed elsewhere. His clearest and most insistent message - and this is what marks him out as a spiritual rather than a political writer, and helps to explain his political wavering and discomfort - is addressed to the individual soul, urging it to seek its proper food.

In an early essay called ‘In a Pine Wood’ Jefferies speaks of “its intense stillness and calm, shutting out as with a thick wall the anxious cares of towns and cities” which calm “lets the mind return in upon itself, and realize its immortality”. Of the ash copse in *Wild Life in a Southern County* he writes:

> The green sprays momentarily pushed aside close immediately behind, shutting cut the vision, and with it the thought of civilisation. These boughs are the gates of another world.

“Another world” is ambiguous. It’s a cliché now, and for all I know it was then; but Jefferies is not writing carelessly. The other world of the ash copse is partly an escape-world; but it is also - the word “gates” suggests it - a new starting-point; a place of other possibilities than those offered by nineteenth-century materialism, a place where the human spirit is at home, and where, as Jefferies writes a little further on “there comes into the mind a feeling of intense joy in the simple fact of living”. *The Story of my Heart* is both circumstantial and explicit:

> In summer I went out into the fields, and let my soul inspire these thoughts under trees, standing against the trunk, or looking up through the branches at the sky. If trees could speak, hundreds of them would say that I had these soul-emotions under them. Leaning against the oak’s massive trunk; and feeling the rough bark and lichen at my back; looking southwards over the grassy fields, cowslip-yellow, at the woods on the slope, I thought my desire of deeper soul-life. Or under the green firs, looking upwards, the sky was -ore deeply

> blue at their tops; then the brake-fern was unrolling, the doves cooing, the thickets astir, the late ash-leaves coming forth. Under the shapely rounded elms, by the hawthorn bushes and hazel, everywhere the same deep desire for the soul-nature; to have from all green things and free the sunlight the inner meaning which was not known to them, that I might be full of light as the woods of the sun's rays. Just to touch the lichened bark of a tree, or the end of a spray projecting over the path as I walked, seemed to repeat the same prayer in me.

"That I might be full of light" is an awesome prayer. It is the prayer from the heart of every mystic. In Jefferies it seems to me particularly beautiful because it is rooted in the real. "That I might be full of light as the woods are full of the sun's rays" might seem a strange simile: woods have their own lovely light, which Jefferies frequently attempts to describe, but surely the open field is sunnier? I believe Jefferies is thinking about the process by which sunshine becomes sap. He wote of it often; as for example in 'The Pageant of Summer' of "the alchemic power of light entering into the solid oak; and see! it bursts forth in countless leaves". Jefferies' desire is for a spiritual photosynthesis.

I hope my examples have by now begun to demonstrate how large a place trees and woods had in Jefferies' imagination. Charlotte Mew wrote of "Jefferies who was only a quiet lover of trees, though never was such a worshipper of earth". I think she may have mistaken his lack of emphasis for lack of intensity. It may be quiet but it is deep – the kind of love that can exist between long-married couples or old friends. The oak had a special place in his thought: it represents the stability so dear to the conservative side of his nature - or perhaps I should say it comforted the insecurity that gave rise to that conservatism. Its long life hints at immortality. It pleases him that it can connect us physically with a past of up to three centuries ago. Again and again he celebrates the oak in description and in metaphor. "Let us labour to make the heart grow larger as we become older, as the spreading oak gives more shelter", he says in 'The Pageant of Summer'. The steeple-shaped pine pointing to heaven, with its mystic cones, has also a special place in his affection. But all trees make gates for him into the spiritual realm. If we collect places where he pursue his quest in *The Story of my Heart* we find him under elms, under an oak, in a wood, and in London sustained by a birch, by a cedar and by an almost daily pilgrimage to an aspen. In the beautiful essay called 'Wild Flowers' he wrote:

> To the heaven thought can reach lifted by the strong arms of the oak, carried up by the ascent of the flame-shaped fir…so it has ever been to me, by day or by night, summer or winter, beneath trees the heart feels nearer to that depth of life the far sky means.

A hint here of the cadences of the covenant in *Genesis* underlines both the cosmic scale and the element of reassurance in Jefferies' tree-mysticism.

Further on in the same essay he writes:

> To see clearly is to value so highly and to feel too deeply. The smallest of the pencilled branches of the bare ash-tree drawn

> distinctly against the winter sky, waving lines one within the other, yet following and pertly parallel, reproducing in the curve of the twig the curve of the greet trunk; is it not a pleasure to trace each twig to its ending?

It's a pleasure he shared with Hopkins and with Ruskin, and his own particular personality and relationship with nature appears very clearly if you compare passages of his and theirs that have a superficial similarity. Hopkins' tree observation in his Journals is beautiful, but with an edge of neurotic guilt, a febrile urgency beside which Jefferies' "Is it not a pleasure?" seems strangely calm and mature. I say strangely, because those are not the epithets that would come immediately to mind to characterise Jefferies. Ruskin's extraordinary genius directed itself, among its myriad targets, to the architecture of twigs and leaves with a minuteness that leaves me at any rate with a strong sense of inadequacy. I greatly admire both Hopkins and Ruskin but by comparison I experience a sense of liberation and possibility when Jefferies describes a tree, or invites me to spend my time looking at a tree, with no sense of desperation or duty, but merely because — "Is it not a pleasure?"

Jefferies realised that beauty was a necessity and not a luxury and he found few things lovelier than trees. "Thrice a year the oaks-become beautiful in a different way", he wrote in *Nature Near London.* And in 'The Pageant of Summer' "oak follows oak and elm ranks with elm,, but the woodlands are pleasant: however many times reduplicated, their beauty only increases". In *Greene Ferne Farm* it is the sight of the sunset lighting up a wood that causes Felix St. Bees to "become" rapt in that deep marvelling which is prayer". You will all be able to multiply examples. In 'Hours of Spring' Jefferies was speaking of a long, hard winter, and he wrote:

> There was everything to repel - the cold, the frost, the hardness, the snow, dark sky and ground, leaflessness ; the very furze chilled and all benumbed. Yet the forest was still beautiful. There was no day that we did not, all of us, glance out and admire it, and say something about it. Harder and harder grew the frost, yet still the forest-clad hills possessed a something that drew the mind open to their largeness and grandeur.

There is a wonderful simplicity about this. Jefferies' gift was to see clearly, and his labour to tell plainly those things that most of us push to the edge of thought or out altogether, but which would sustain us if we would attend to them. This passage seems to me particularly poignant for the reason that it is very, very rare for Jefferies to write of a shared experience - "There was no day that we did not, all of us, glance out at it and admire it, and say something about it" - and one has the sense of the beauty softening the heart and drawing into community. One feels for a moment that the claim of Wordsworth's that always seems a little like wishful thinking – that love of nature lends to love of man – may possibly be true.

As Raymond Williams has pointed out Jefferies takes a certain pleasure in *After London* in re-covering the land with trees after the catastrophe. He

makes it again resemble the forest of “ancient trees” he so often looks a little wistfully back to. Not that he is starry-eyed about the more primitive society he describes. If Jefferies could have seen just what we do to trees - the defoliants of modern warfare, or the unhealthy city-dwellers devouring the tropical rainforests as they rush in an out of a MacDonalds (he always deplored haste and restlessness) he might have wondered whether humankind was indeed progressing as he hoped. At the very demoralised end of his own life his personal optimism gave way - “I think I have heard that the oaks are down”. This seemed to symbolise the destruction of living and enduring hope. But it would be a great wrong to Jefferies and a great loss to ourselves to let the terminal despair of his illness negate the vision of the rest of his work. He wrote hopefully of the future as a way of helping it to happen. This is how hope operates. Thus, he consoles himself that Iden, and perhaps in a sense he himself, was merely born before his time:

> If only he could have lived three hundred years later, the greater world would have begun to find out Iden and to idolise him, and to make pilgrimages to Coombe Oaks to hear him talk, for Iden could talk of the trees and grass, and all that the Earth bears, as if one had conversed face to face with the great god Pan himself.

Let us hope that as many as possible of we who live a hundred years later will recognise the importance to humankind and to “all that the earth bears” of what Jefferies saw.