

‘I am in Eternity now’ Henry Williamson and *The Story of My Heart*

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The background to this subject should be familiar. That HW, stationed in Folkestone in 1919 in the aftermath of the First World War, while browsing in a bookshop (Wetherheads in George Street, obliterated in a bombing raid in the Second World War) picked up a copy of Richard Jefferies’ extraordinary visionary book *The Story of My Heart*¹ and, as he stated in various writings in later years, read it avidly to the very end; which event marked a great change in his life. That someone else felt as he did gave him back his belief in himself and in life. He vowed to follow in Jefferies footsteps and continue his work to write the Truth.

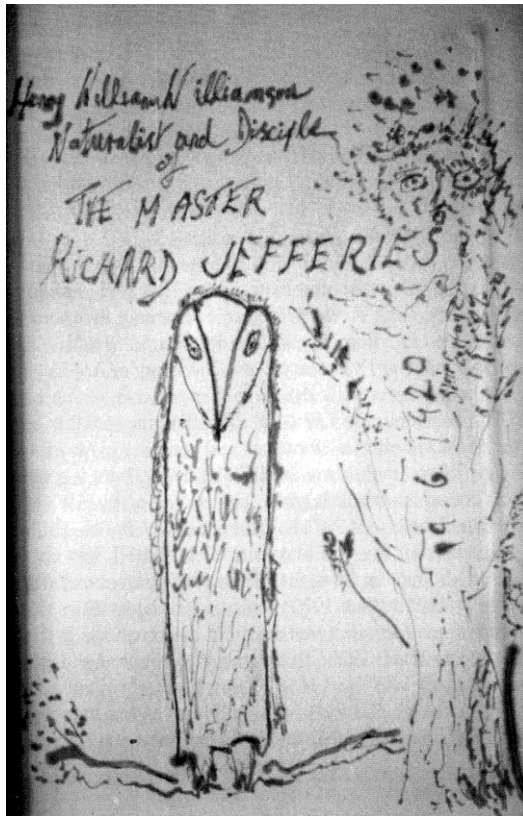
That particular copy of the book is not in HW’s archive. There is a rather nice Longmans 1917 ‘pocket edition,’ bound in soft dark green leather, signed by HW 8.1.1922—and a first edition (1883) which had belonged to his father-in-law Charles Hibbert. But what had happened to that original copy was not known until in 2006 I was contacted by someone who wondered if a copy he had just bought was indeed this volume. It has this sketch at the front seemingly drawn by HW in June 1920, while on holiday at Skirr Cottage, Georgeham (see next page).

That seems genuine to me (despite some apparent discrepancies in the writing). HW was indeed at Skirr Cottage in June 1920. But the history behind the book’s disappearance remains a mystery except that HW did send a copy of an obviously important book to his ex-headmaster, Frank Lucas, which I feel (but cannot prove) was that copy of *Story*.

In 1919 HW’s life was in considerable turmoil. That he was in a state of almost complete breakdown due to his experience of the war has become increasingly obvious as we have peeled back the various layers over recent years. His muted relief that the war was actually over was increasingly negated by his feelings about his dead and wounded comrades and the cause and effect of the war itself. He was also in the throes of his first real and somewhat disastrous love-affair with the already married Mabs Baker—the fictional fabulous Eve Fairfax. His

¹ Richard Jefferies, *The Story of My Heart: My Autobiography* (London: Longman, 1883).

behaviour in reaction to all this became rather wild and unpredictable, and at the end of July 1919 he was sent off on the month's leave due to serving officers (which he spent in the Georgeham cottage with Mabs Baker) and then was relocated to Cannock Chase.



Sketch found in HW's 1st edition copy of *The Story of My Heart*

We know HW was already a reader of Richard Jefferies work. When he was about ten years old his father had handed over his father's three-volume first edition copy of *Bevis* and also we are told he had his grandfather's copies of *The Amateur Poacher*, and *Wild Life in a Southern Country*. We know also that HW had asked for some Jefferies' titles as part of his Bramley Essay Prize as he left Colfe's Grammar School (those two hefty 'Bible in Art' volumes must have been rather a disappointment!). But *The Story of My Heart*, published in 1883, was very different from Jefferies usual writing on country matters and natural history, written, as William (Bill) Keith (later a President of the RJS) termed it, in *The*

Rural Tradition.²

Richard Church giving the Memorial Lecture on the Centenary of Jefferies' birth in 1948 said:

To some critics it is a notorious rather than famous book. The uncomfortable quality of it (it gives the sensation of holding a fast-breathing bird in one's hand) ... [puts people off] the unique quality of Jefferies' genius.

There are just a few details that need establishing to put *The Story of My Heart* into context. In 1883 Richard Jefferies was living at 'Savernake', Lorna Road, West Brighton. He had moved there from Surbiton at the end of the previous year, having been extremely ill throughout 1881 with fistula, an ulceration of the gut for which he had undergone four operations within one year, and which led to his final illness which seems to have attacked several vital organs. After moving to Brighton Jefferies must have been working hard for he wrote to his publisher, Charles Longman, on 22 June 1883:

I have just finished writing a book about which I have been meditating seventeen years ... it really is an autobiography, an actual record of thought.

A week later he sent his manuscript off to Longmans with the accompanying note:

My book is a real record—absolutely and unfailingly true.

Story appeared in November 1883. So it was written over the winter of 1882/83 in Brighton—at a time when Jefferies was recovering from a most serious illness and was no doubt suddenly very aware of time and his own mortality. The poetic visionary prose poured from his mind: reading it one is caught up in an urgent flow. He had to get those thoughts down on paper. As HW stated in his Wedmore lecture (see below): 'He was in a race with Death'.

Jefferies was born in November 1848, so in June 1883 he was thirty-four years old. He tells us he had had the feelings expressed in *Story* for seventeen years, so he had first started to have these thoughts when he was only seventeen years of age. That gives us 1866—and it was in March 1866 that Jefferies started work on the *North Wiltshire Herald*. He probably had similar feelings from a very early age but perhaps could not articulate them to himself then. His young life was in some ways very similar to that of HW in that he was basically a loner and spent his spare time roaming the countryside and watching its wildlife with close

² W.J. Keith, *The Rural Tradition* (University of Toronto, 1974). Contains, among other rural writers, chapters on Richard Jefferies and Henry Williamson, the HW chapter reprinted in *HWSJ* 31, 1995. The chapter on RJ concentrates, interestingly, on *The Story of My Heart* rather than RJ's actual rural writing. Keith sees *Story* as a pivot within the rural writing genre: before *Story* rural writing tends to involve the hand of God; after, by the thought of the author.

attention. Both had that very sharp sense of sight and imagination which translates into 'insight'. HW worked on a newspaper as had Jefferies. And like HW and his Aunt Mary Leopoldina, Jefferies also had an aunt who encouraged him, indeed with whom he lived for a while. This was his mother's sister whose married name was Mrs. Harrild. This makes rather an interesting little scenario: her husband had a printing business in Fleet Street and his brother had a stationery business seemingly very similar to that of Thomas Turney. I would suggest that those two men, Messrs Turney & Harrild, would have known each other (we know, for instance, that Thomas Turney knew Lord Vansittart, also in a similar business). The Harrilds would no doubt have been very proud of their literary relation and talked about him to acquaintances. Thomas Turney knew HW's grandfather, Henry William Williamson senior. They lived next-door to each other in Sutton. And that would make a link and explain (what is otherwise rather odd) how HW senior knew that Jefferies was living in Brighton—and indeed the actual address—when he visited on holiday there in 1883. There is no proof of this but it seems a most likely explanation.



Photograph of RJ taken when aged 30, in 1879

There are two loose copies of a photo of Jefferies, taken in June 1879 when he

was 30 years old, in HW's archives, obviously removed from books, but I cannot account for their source. There is a second illustration, again found loose: an etching made from that photo well after J's death and used in some later books. But note that HW's copy has RJ's signature on it. Besant's *Eulogy* has a similar signature under its Frontispiece photograph so I think one has to assume it was copied and added onto this etching copy by HW himself, desperately wanting that close association with the man he felt had shown him the way forward.³



Etching made from photograph after Jefferies death

The Story of My Heart is not an easy book to comprehend. In a short analysis requested by his publisher Jefferies described the book in his own words as 'a confession'.⁴ The author describes the successive stages of emotion and thought through which he passed until he arrived at the conclusions which are set forth

³ [Ed: HW would have torn the etching out of one of RJ's books published by Longmans. This included their second edition of *The Story of My Heart* [1891] that also displayed the autograph, as well as their new edition of *Field and Hedgerow* [1892]. Longmans paid William Strang £15 to make the etching from the London Stereographic Co. photograph of RJ (1879).]

⁴ Richard Jefferies wrote, at the request of his publishers, an 'Analysis' of *Story* for Longman's House Journal 'Notes on Books'. This was printed in issue dated 3 Nov. 1883. It was reprinted in a 'Preface' written by Charles Longman himself for the Pocket edition first published 1907—edition in HW's archive dated 1917—and is inscribed by HW on '8.1.22'.

in the latter part of the volume:

the book is in fact an Autobiography of a Soul, or of Thought ...

He tells us of the hill he used to climb to escape (from the constrictions of home life); how the climbing of it gradually freed him from the trammel of ordinary life until he reached its summit and was:

utterly alone with the sun and the earth. ... Lying down upon the grass, I spoke in my soul to the earth, the sun, the air, and the distant sea far beyond sight.

That hill was Liddington Hill, three miles from Jefferies' home at Coate, near Swindon. Liddington is topped with a Roman camp or 'castle' as it was known. ('Roborough Castle' in HW's *The Gale of the World* is similarly a Roman Camp site.) What a wonderful allegory of life that climbing of the hill makes without any further content whatsoever: upward and onward until one is suddenly free of life's burden and enters paradise. Except, for Richard Jefferies there was no 'paradise'—no life after death: for him God did not exist, neither did Time:

It is eternity now, I am in the midst of it. It is about me in the sunshine; I am in it, as the butterfly floats in the light-laden air. It is eternity now, it always was eternity, and always will be. By no possible means could I get into time if I tried. I am in eternity now and must there remain.

Jefferies also felt in total communion with the spirit of the man who had been buried, as he put it, in 'ante-historic time' in the tumulus on which he was lying. The past is the same as the present.

We all possibly have had similar feelings in similar places. The concept certainly went straight into the core of HW's very vulnerable psyche. I imagine him taking that copy of *Story* up onto Cæsar's Camp on the top of Castle Hill overlooking Folkestone—and some of you will remember our own visit there and what an atmospheric place it still is. HW's description of Willie Maddison's (and so his own) vigil there on Peace Night 1919 from *The Dream of Fair Women*—which in real life took place a few short weeks after HW first read *Story*—is redolent with Jefferies thoughts in *Story*.

... A laboured climb up the steep sides, rests in the long grasses, then upward until the summit was reached. ... He walked on feeling the strength of solitude coming upon him. ... [until finally he comes to the tumulus] Where under the grassy mounds the bones of pagan men were buried. In reverie he fancied that some skin-clad man had sat and dreamed here, ...

He felt that the spirits of dead soldiers were with him.

Jefferies did not believe in what he refers to as 'deity'—a godhead: God himself.⁵

⁵ This possibly explains why Francis Thompson does not seem to have had any knowledge of the book. The Catholic world that FT inhabited could never have countenanced what the established

I conclude that no deity has anything to do with nature. There is no god in nature, nor in any matter anywhere ... It [nature] is a force without a mind.

Nor in human affairs. He gives several examples of evil happening to the just and the good, from Classical times and more recent:

I cease, therefore, to look for traces of the deity in life, because no such traces exist.

Jefferies also denies evolution of the species (Darwin's spearhead *The Origin of the Species* had appeared in 1859 and so was well-established before Jefferies even started his own writing career but was of course a very controversial concept.)

Nothing is evolved, no evolution takes place, there is no record of such an event, it is pure assertion ... a modern superstition and proceeds from assumption alone.

But he feels there is something more, something superior to God, to be found. This 'something' is within oneself and should be searched for. He uses the word 'psyche' but rejects that for 'soul': in the sense of an intellectual, emotional, moral, principle, not in its religious sense. 'Soul' is a word that the Church has rather taken over to mean the 'Holy' part of a being. So Jefferies was rather wary of using the word. But the alternative 'Psyche', although with a similar meaning was not quite strong enough for Jefferies (nor, of course, so poetical, especially as a repetitive noun in what is virtually a prose-poem).(Perhaps 'Spirit' would have been a better word.)

He also 'prays' for more knowledge of this 'soul'—such prayer is a cry of pain for something he can never reach. 'Prayer' again not in the religious sense but as an examination, or search, of one's innermost being.

Jefferies explains that the practice of slow deep breathing puts him into an exalted trance state. Such breathing is a well-known feature of Shamanism and other ancient beliefs as a means to contact the spirit world. Note that HW also mentions the practice: Phillip is taught deep breathing by Irene and Barley in the *Chronicle* and the real-life Barbara Krebs (one of the guests of Miss Johnson, HW's eccentric neighbour in Georgeham) was advocating this (along with vegetarianism) in 1921. A further potent example is the séance episode in the *Gale* (mediums use 'deep breathing' to contact the 'other world').

But the overpowering factor in Jefferies philosophy is the sun, together with the moon and stars (Lyra is a constant theme throughout) but the sun is dominant (as also with William Blake and Francis Thompson—and HW—to tie

Church would have considered blasphemy. FT, born 1859, was aged 24 when *Story* was published in 1883. RJ was then 35 years old—and died four years later before his 39th birthday. FT died in 1907.

into our overall theme). Again this links to the most ancient beliefs. Indeed, whatever one's actual religious beliefs, the fact that the sun is the centre of our universe and without it we could not exist is incontrovertible. But very few writers use this idea as a central visionary symbol.

Sylvia Bruce, in her excellent essay 'A Frequency of Phoenixes'⁶ in Brocard's *Symposium*, states that Jefferies was

a visionary more lucid than Blake ... There recur in his works incandescent expressions of admiration for a symbolically pagan Sun-god ...[which] resulted in that worship of ancient sunlight [of Henry Williamson].

Jefferies' powerful book needs more careful reading. The crux of the book is the search for truth—a truth only to be found in the beauty of Nature and in oneself. And that there is no end to this search or its truth. The search will continue onwards and outwards in an ever-widening circle of Ideas. The book is an invocation, an exaltation—a 'stream of consciousness'. Above all, it is totally and solely, visionary in content and concept—the sense of imaginary insight. It ends with what is an incantation, rather like one of the psalms of the Bible.

I have been obliged to write these things by an irresistible impulse which has worked in me since my early years ...

Let me launch forth and sail over the rim of the sea yonder, and when another rim arises, over that, and again, and onwards into an ever-widening ocean of idea and life. ...

I know that there is something infinitely higher than deity [and he continues even the great sun burning in the sky is feeble compared to what could – must – be beyond.]

In itself my soul desires; my existence, my soul-existence is in itself my prayer, and so long as it exists so long will it pray that I may have the fullest soul-life.

Jefferies felt a desperate need to share his innermost feelings with the world at large through *The Story of My Heart*: that mankind should strive towards a state of perfection only to be achieved by absorbing the hidden essence of every aspect of the natural world— only through contemplation of the wonders of nature can we truly live.

Let us look now at the effect of this book on HW. A very short time after he had first read the book and while still stationed in Folkestone, HW sent off this letter to the *London Evening News* which was obviously running a feature series on 'The Most Beautiful Sentence'. The cutting is pasted into an Army Notebook (together with a number of cuttings to do with his Norton motorcycle!).

⁶ Sylvia Bruce, 'A Frequency of Phoenixes' in Henry Williamson, *The Man, the Writings, A Symposium*, ed. F. Brocard Sewell (Tabb House, 1980).

THE MOST BEAUTIFUL SENTENCE.

"How are the mighty fallen! Tell it not in Gath, publish it not in the streets of Askelon. . . . Saul and Jonathan were lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their death they were not divided; they were swifter than eagles, they were stronger than lions. . . . I am distressed for thee, my brother Jonathan: very pleasant hast thou been unto me: thy love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women (2 Samuel I., 19-26).—G. A. Leask, 22, Buckley-road, Brondesbury, N.W. 6.

Rupert Brooke's "If I Should Die."

"If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign
field

That is forever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust con-
cealed;

A dust whom England bore, shaped, made
aware,

Gave once her flowers to love, her ways
to roam,

A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns at
home."

—Mabel Colquhoun, "Southgarth," Tenny-
son-road, Bognor, Sussex.

On a Tombstone.

"There is a nobler glory
The consciousness of good, which neither
gold,
Nor sordid fame, nor hope of heavenly
bliss.
Can purchase, but a life of resolute good,
Unalterable will."

I do not know the author, but I copied it
many years since from a tombstone, I be-
lieve.—G. Walter Warren, 27, Winchendon-
road, Parson's Green.

My Heart Opens Wide.

"Softly breathes the sweet south wind,
gently the yellow corn waves beneath; the
ancient, ancient sun shines on the fresh
grass and the flower; my heart opens wide
as the broad, broad earth. I am in eter-
nity now; I am in the midst of it. It is all
about me in the sunshine; I am in it as the
butterfly floats in the light-laden air"
(Richard Jefferies).—H. W. Williamson
(Lieutenant, The Bedfordshire Regiment),
Folkestone.

"That I May Pray Aright."

Here is a sentence the author of which I
cannot give. Perhaps some of your readers
can help me:—

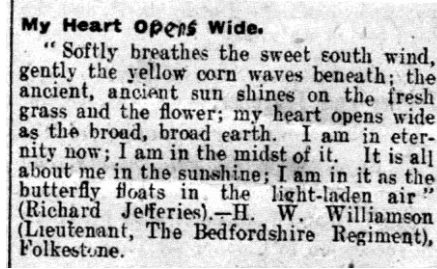
"Since prayer is a petition
For guidance to the Light;
I rest my gaze on your sweet face,
That I may pray aright."

—E. W. Hatten, 362, Brixton-road, S.W. 9.

*The London
Evening News,
early summer,
1919.*

HW's 'Most Beautiful Sentence': cutting pasted into an old army notebook.

HW's contribution—taken from *The Story of My Heart*—reads:



My Heart Opens Wide

'Softly breathes the sweet south wind, gently the yellow corn waves beneath: the ancient, ancient sun shines on the fresh grass and the flower; my heart opens wide as the broad, broad earth. I am in eternity now; I am in the midst of it. It is all about me in the sunshine; I am in it as the butterfly floats in the light-laden air.' (Richard Jefferies)—H.W. Williamson (Lieutenant, The Bedfordshire Regiment), Folkestone.

That 'sentence' of course contains the root of HW's own evocative title: 'Ancient Sunlight'. To clarify HW has actually taken two separate sentences to make his point: the second actually comes a few pages before the first in *Story* itself.

Once HW started publishing his own books, we find he dedicated *The Lone Swallows* (1922) to Richard Jefferies. While the description of Jim Holloman in *The Beautiful Years* (1921) is lifted directly from Walter Besant's 1888 *Eulogy*⁷ and the poignant death of Jim in the lime kiln surely represents Jefferies own death from tuberculosis—choking to death as it were. (It is interesting to note how early HW had the Besant volume—before 1921.) And we also find in *The Pathway* that Willie Maddison tells us:

... Being a coward, I died a thousand deaths during the War; in fact I died altogether, and in December, 1918, coming home to be demobilised ... I happened to go into a bookshop in Dover, and saw a copy of Jefferies *Story of My Heart* ... I read one sentence, and in that moment was changed: all the stored impressions of my boyhood seemed to return, with a mysterious spirit that brought the tears to my eyes many times as I read on ...

Years later, in his Wedmore Lecture given in 1959 to the Royal Literature Society (and later that year to the Richard Jefferies Society), 'Some Nature Writers and Civilisation',⁸ HW—recently appointed FRLS—told his literary

⁷ HW, *The Beautiful Years* (Collins, 1921). Full background details available on the HWS website 'Life's Work' section. Walter Besant, *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies* (Chatto & Windus, 1893), see p.87-88.

⁸ HW, FRLS, 'Some Nature Writers and Civilisation', Wedmore Memorial lecture to the Royal Society of Literature, 9 October 1959. Printed in *Essays by Divers Hands*, Vol. XXX (Transactions of the RSL). Reprinted as a separate pamphlet in *Threnos of T.E. Lawrence and other writings*, ed. J. Gregory,

audience that when he first read *The Story of My Heart*:

It was to me a revelation of total truth ... my entire outlook changed. ...

Here was more than consolation after the sudden ending of the hectic days and nights of war-time. ...

Suddenly a new world—the world of boyhood come again, with a mysterious beauty never before seen in words upon the printed page.

HW relates how H.M. Tomlinson (well-known writer of the era, especially travel and his war recollections *All Our Yesterdays*)⁹ had told him that *Story* was a dangerous book. He was not the only one who thought so. Many critics slated it and particularly the established Church found it dangerous as it denied the existence of God.¹⁰ HW admits that in later years he could understand this attitude. He was also convinced that Jefferies' state of mind—and thus *Story*—arose out of his unhappy childhood. HW of course allied himself to the same cause and effect, as did Francis Thompson to that of Shelley: neither HW or FT with any real cause!

In due course HW edited various volumes of Jefferies' work, some in the 1930s, some later. (Full information is available on the HW Society website in the 'Life's Work' section under Jefferies.) In his 1937 edition of *Selections* from the work of Richard Jefferies,¹¹ HW states:

In moments of inspiration [Jefferies] believed himself to be a prophet, thinker and writer of the world.

He was a genius, a visionary whose thought and feeling were wide as the human world, prophet of an age not yet come into being—the age of sun, of harmony. ...

[*Story*] is a spiritual autobiography which must be read as a human document and for its luminous pictures.

It is for me one of the most beautiful and most noble books in the world.

HW attended the Richard Jefferies Centenary celebrations at Swindon in 1948 and became President of the Richard Jefferies Society from 1965–1975.¹² But all that was in the future from that moment of total awareness of the first reading of *The Story of My Heart*. So let us return to 1919—or rather now to 1920. HW had

HWS, 1994.

⁹ H.M. Tomlinson (1873–1958), journalist and writer, war correspondent WWI (*All Our Yesterdays*), friend of HW, who had several of his books.

¹⁰ This may explain why RJ's wife, Jessie, and a close friend, insisted that Jefferies had 'converted' on his death-bed. Such a gesture would have restored RJ's reputation within the Church.

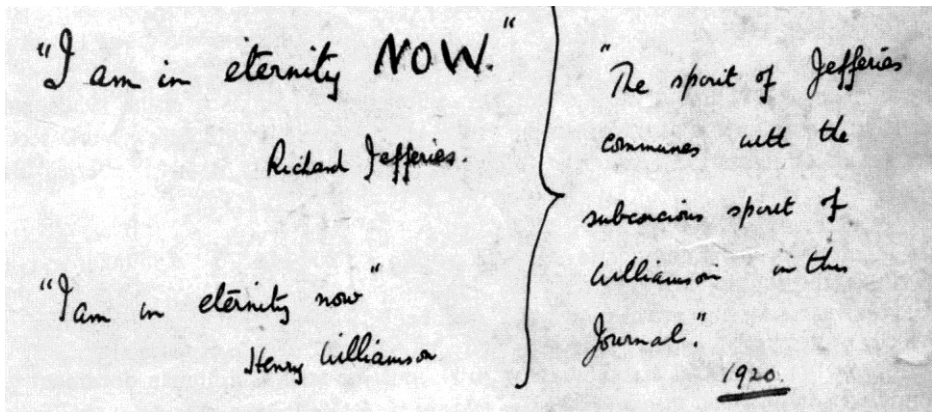
¹¹ *Richard Jefferies, Selections of his Work with details of his Life, and Circumstances of his Death and Immortality*, edited Henry Williamson (Faber, 1937).

¹² HW's article reporting this event appeared in *The Adelphi*, Oct-Dec 1948: reprinted in HWSJ 41, pp.26–28. Other RJ items in HWSJ 41 include details of RJ books owned by HW, various details and photographs of HW's time as President of the RJ Society. 1965–75 and a major essay: Richard Stewart, 'Henry Williamson's Debt to Richard Jefferies', pp.8–16.

left the army and was once again living in the family home, 11 Eastern Road. He had determined to be a writer and was already working on the draft of his first novel.¹³ This purpose, this aim, to be a writer surely actually stems from the time of his convalescence at Trefusis in Cornwall in summer 1917, when I am quite sure in my own mind HW was recommended to write as a form of therapy for his traumatic stress. We find various references to him writing from that time onwards. So really the revelatory *Story* gives him a new impetus, a new belief in himself, at what was a very low point, rather than being the impetus to become a writer. But he had found a soul-mate: someone who felt exactly as he had felt about nature but which had been overlain by the horror of the war years and was lost. Remember those words HW wrote at the end of his schoolboy Nature Diary:

Finish, Finish, Finish, the hope and illusion of youth,
For ever, and for ever, and for ever.

In January 1920 HW started work as a canvasser in the Classified Advertisement department of *The Times*. At the same time he bought himself two substantial old ledgers. In one of these he recorded his daily thoughts and writing notes, perhaps prompted by Jefferies own extensive 'Notebooks'.¹⁴ This is what I refer to as his 'Richard Jefferies Journal'. On its cover he made what is in effect a dedication to: 'THE MASTER RICHARD JEFFERIES'; and quoted Jefferies on the first page:



¹³ For details of HW's earliest unpublished writings see Dr. J.W. Blench 'The Apprenticeship of a Novelist', Parts I, II, III in *HWSJ* 17, 18, & 19 respectively also 'Henry Williamson, The Flax of Dream' *HWSJ* 20. See also, Dr. J.W. Blench, 'The Influence of Richard Jefferies on HW, Pt. I, *HWSJ* 25, March 1992, pp.5-20; Pt. II, *HWSJ* 26, Sept. 1992, pp.5-31.

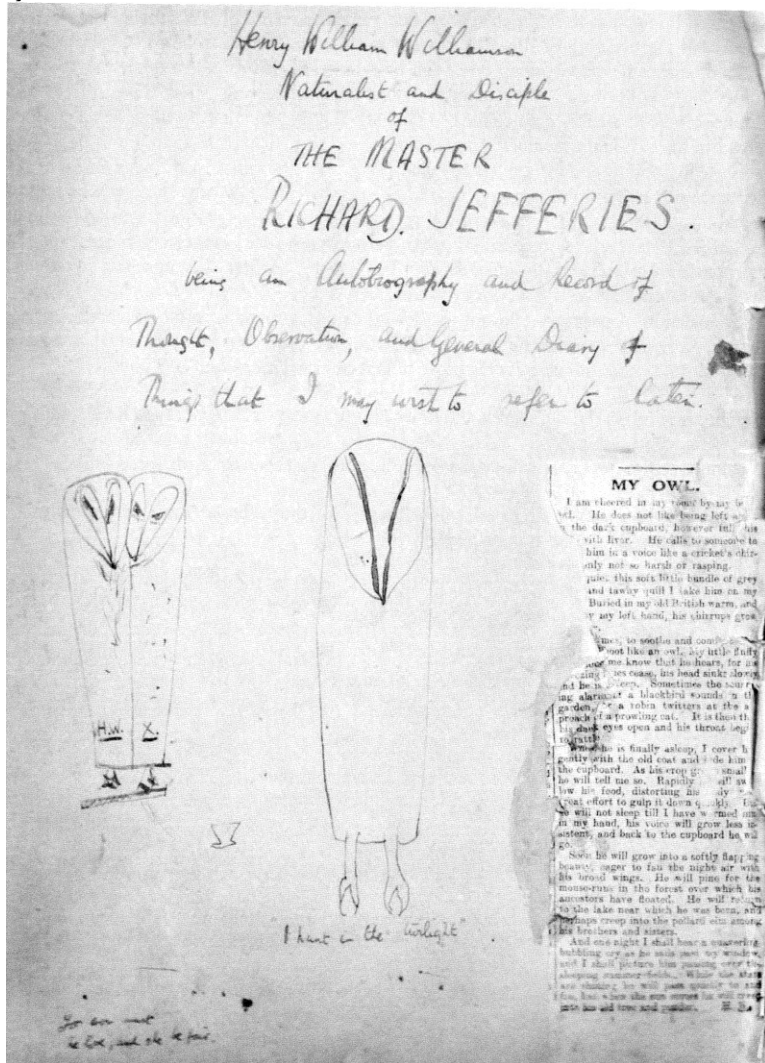
¹⁴ Samuel J. Looker, first President of the RJ Society, transcribed various of RJ's 'Notebooks' (*The Notebooks of Richard Jefferies*, Grey Walls Press, 1948), and edited various other RJ books.

I am in eternity NOW, Richard Jefferies

I am in eternity now, Henry Williamson

The spirit of Jefferies communes with the subconscious spirit of Williamson in this Journal, 1920.

One can see that HW felt himself in almost mystical communion with this visionary writer.



Inscription on the cover of HW's 'Richard Jefferies Journal'

The 'Journal' is an amazing document of this early period. It is not a total statement of 'visionary' thought, as in Jefferies' *Story* but contains a record of HW's thoughts as he tries to sort out the meaning of life. The content is varied and often troubled. A great deal is drafts of stories he was working on at that time but HW also reveals a desperate need and vulnerability concerning 'love' (mainly at this time concerning Mabs Baker ('Eve') and Doline Rendel ('Spica')—both coming to nought). But underlying everything is the constant thread to his two main mentors: Francis Thompson and Richard Jefferies (who hold what are virtually opposite views on 'Deity'), and HW's own absorption with the problem of the existence of God and the meaning of life. (remember that HW was in a state of trauma breakdown at this point.) And, despite his apparent total response to the ideals and feelings of Richard Jefferies, it is obvious that unlike his mentor, he does not reject the existence of a deity—of God—but is very troubled by the 'if so—why?' conflict (the 'cause and effect') that then arises. Neither does HW reject evolution!

A selection of passages relevant to Richard Jefferies found in HW's 'Richard Jefferies Journal' will help to illustrate this central influence. The first entry is dated Sunday 8 February 1920, and immediately the prose of that entry is lyrical and HW quotes:

The air is full of the sun's spirit, the forest appears to be smiling gently to itself.

Puzzling over his problem with Mabs Baker he notes that she has 'earth' force while:

Poets have the 'spiritual force' within them—of the aetherial force perhaps the forerunners of the after-life. Who knows?

On 21 March:

Last Day of Winter!

A wonderful day – bright sun pouring down in waves of light and heat, gentle wind. I went, for the first time since spring 1914, into 'Squire Norman's', Bromley.

And a little further on:

Poor Jefferies, I wish I had known him. Father told me today that my grandfather, also H.W.W., knew him & walked with him. I wonder if I shall ever become like RJ? Sometimes I think so ...

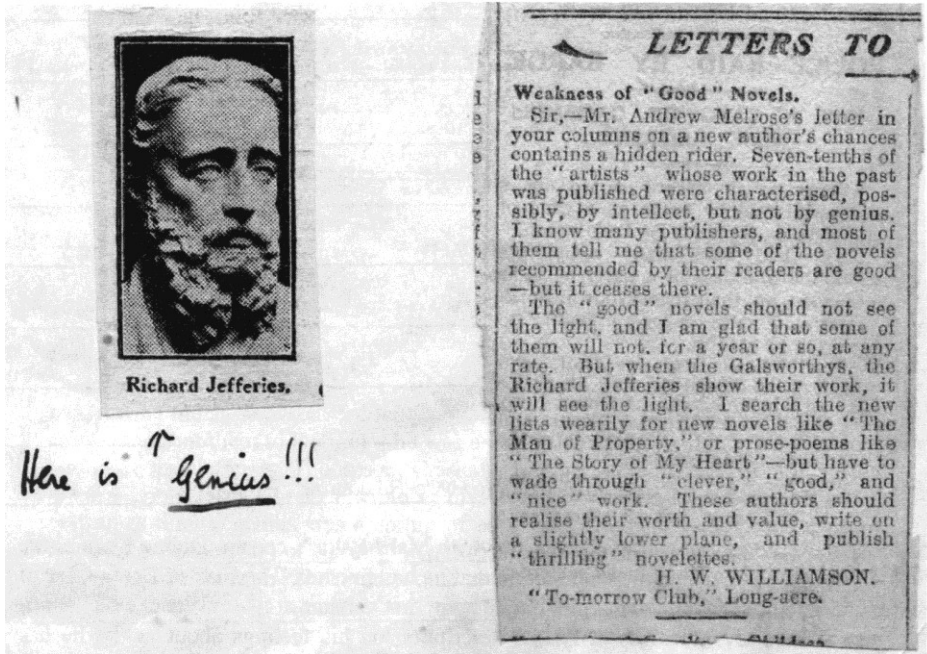
And immediately continues in distinctive 'Jefferies' style:

The bees were climbing over the bright yellow lesser celandine—tame bees. The flowers were bright with sun-dust, varnished and gleaming ...

Then after another long page of similar description HW notes that the following week these flowers will all be gone:

I shall look for the promise that gives me the feeling of such rapturous moments—I talk to it with my soul: I actually feel that—but it will be gone soon, so will the violet. As Jefferies said ‘Nothing twice’.

At the bottom of this page HW has pasted in two cuttings. One is a letter from himself printed in a newspaper. Something has annoyed him! The cutting reads:



Cuttings pasted into HW's 'RJ Journal'

Weakness of 'Good' Novels

Sir,—Mr. Andrew Melrose's letter in your columns on a new author's chances contains a hidden rider. Seven-tenths of the 'artist' whose work in the past was published were characterised, possibly, by intellect, but not by genius. I know many publishers and most of them tell me that some of the novels recommended by their readers are good—but it ceases there.

The 'good' novel should not see the light, and I am glad that some of them will not, for a year or so, at any rate. But, when the Galsworthys, the Richard Jefferies show their work, it will see the light. I search the new list wearily for new novels like *The Man of Property* or prose-poems like *The Story of My Heart*—but have to wade through 'clever', 'good', and 'nice' work. These authors should realise their worth and value, write on a slightly lower plane, and publish 'thrilling' novelties.

H.W. WILLIAMSON, Tomorrow Club, Long-acre.

And to emphasise his point he has pasted next to that a cutting of the memorial

bust of Jefferies— marking that **Genius**’

Soon after this he has written—very obviously echoing Jefferies:

I love my nature, my birds and flowers; I am happy in solitude and thought. ...
Beauty (abstract) is a sublime spiritual passion with me.

Another related cutting pasted in reads:

April 17, 1920

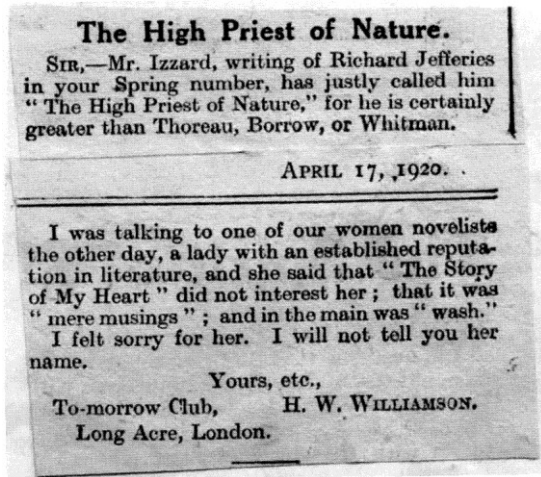
The High Priest of Nature

Sir,—Mr. Izzard, writing of Richard Jefferies in your Spring Number, has justly called him ‘The High Priest of Nature’, for he is certainly greater than Thoreau, Borrow, or Whitman.

I was talking to one of our women novelists the other day, a lady with an established reputation in literature, and she said that *The Story of My Heart* did not interest her; that it was ‘mere musings’ and in the main was ‘wash’.

I felt sorry for her. I will not tell you her name.

Yours, etc., H.W. WILLIAMSON, Tomorrow Club, Long Acre, London.



Cutting pasted into HW's 'RJ Journal'

Apart from the sentiment touching on our subject today – HW is not aiming to make himself popular in the literary world! The lady was of course, Mrs Dawson Scott, (or ‘Mrs Sappho’ as she was known) founder of the Tomorrow Club and later of PEN, who would have recognised herself immediately!

At this point HW has met and fallen in love with Mabs Baker’s cousin, Doline Rendle (the fictional ‘Spica’). He notes now with elation that he has finished ‘The Flax of Dream’ but at some point added in the margin that he burnt that version.

There follows several pages of lyrical description on his feelings about nature he has seen:

Beautiful, always beautiful, is thought – or freedom from conscious thought, in the sunshine.

And again:

Love dwells in the heart of the wild things—the sun sends love in the great flowing flood to the earth. And the earth will always keep my heart young.

HW describes a conversation he had with Major Pemberton, Chief of the Advertising Dept. of *The Times*, so his immediate boss, with whom HW has obviously discussed his feelings about Jefferies, noting his kindness about HW's future writing career:

He is a very charming man and helps me a lot. He said 'Richard Jefferies is watching your progress, Williamson—remember.'

Wherein is much food for reflexion. An ordinary man would never have said that. ['Reflexion' is an alternative spelling for 'reflection'.]

Then on May 8:

Went into Squire Norman's ... I thought three things while I wandered.

[1] Jefferies (I am always thinking of him—his spirit dwells with me, I am convinced—beautiful Jefferies!), [2] Doline, and [3] immortality of the soul.

The latter arose from the fact that he nearly trod on, and so would have killed:

a little, frightened frog. Who guards him? Who put him on the earth. And is so utterly indifferent whether he is crushed or lives. 500,000 years ago man was like an ape. Who cared then if a great forest monster killed him? ... Where does the frog-spirit go after crushing out? Where man goes, so the frog also goes – of that I am CONVINCED. Gradually my thought is reaching the infinite thought—circle of immortality and soul-ocean.

That is just a fragment of a long passage—but it gives the gist of HW's thought-process: his puzzlings over the problem of existence of an overall deity (God)—of eternity—of life after death—and that animals must be equal to humans (i.e. if man has a soul then so do animals). Two days later, on 10 May, a further passage has similar content.

Perhaps I will achieve fame within a year or so, and make sufficient to go into the country. I want no fortune— just enough to live upon, and the people who matter recognising me as someone similar to Jefferies. Bought Francis Thompson's poems today (and sent them to Doline)—he was a Christ-like genius! I am believing more and more that Jefferies, Thompson, Crashaw, Kempis, Milton, draw from the same inspiration as Jesus Christ. I wrote in my 'Flax'—'genius is not a fire—a fire consumes things: genius was a spring of pure limpid thought-water coming from the depths (or heights) of eternity.' That spring rose in Jefferies—and more so, in Thompson. Jefferies, had he lived, would have come to that conclusion, I am sure. I am more than sure—it is a part of me, even as Jefferies' spirit writes through me.

You can see there how HW is in mid-1920 beginning to form the nucleus of the book he was soon to write *The Star-born*, where at the end that small cluster of figures surrounding the Christ-figure include Richard Jefferies and Francis Thompson together with some other tortured creative souls (one is Van Gogh). I think we can say with some authority that *The Star-born* is HW's equivalent to Jefferies' visionary *The Story of my Heart*. But with a major difference: HW believed in the deity.

One can see how HW is, in mid-1920, beginning to form the nucleus of the book he was soon to write—*The Star-born*, where at the end that small cluster of figures surrounding the Christ-figure include Richard Jefferies, Francis Thompson, Shelley, together with some other tortured creative souls (one is Van Gogh), *The Star-born*, although not published until 1933, was actually written in 1922, at the point in his life when he was most under the influence of Jefferies and the content of *Story*. At that point in his 'RJ Journal' it is noticeable that HW's tortured puzzling over the central problems of the meaning of life (for want of a better expression) more or less fades away. HW had anchored his thoughts in that book.

As the pendant volume to HW's *The Flax of Dreams*, and thus supposedly 'The Policy of Reconstruction' written by Willie Maddison, *The Star-born* is not very convincing. Indeed it becomes rather puzzling for the reader. 'Policy' as written by Willie, from the little one gains from *The Pathway*, was seemingly a socialistic revisionist view of education. Indeed, as soon as one knows the background of *Star-born*, the impossibility is totally apparent.¹⁵ But as a statement of HW's own thoughts, an allegory of his belief and his thoughts about the existence of deity and the meaning of life, the book takes on a very different aspect.

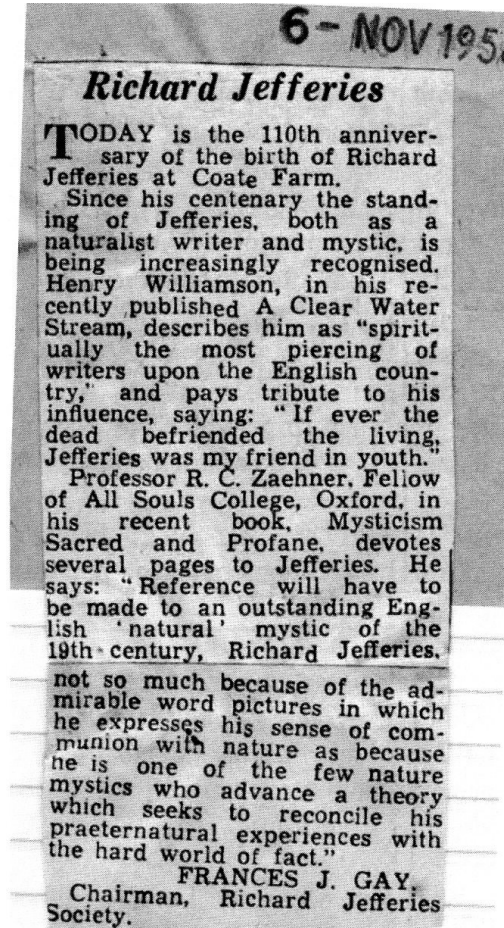
I think therefore that we can say with some authority that *Star-born* is HW's equivalent to Jefferies' visionary *The Story of My Heart*. But with a major difference: HW believed in the deity.

It is interesting that two main mentors had such opposing views but with a common purpose. Francis Thompson's ideas basically ruled by the God of the Catholic church: Richard Jefferies, an atheist, rejecting any form of Godhead. But both 'visionary': both concerned with a 'higher' Truth. HW seems to have incorporated this 'visionary' aspect into everything he wrote. It was, as with Jefferies and Thompson, innate within his psyche—or 'soul'. His constant use of the concept of the search for 'Truth' is surely equivalent to Jefferies idea of 'Soul'.

HW's 'Richard Jefferies Journal' goes on till late 1922, but the angst and the

¹⁵ See HSWJ 36 (2000), devoted to explanation of and background to HW's *The Star-born*, including an unpublished introduction; also see HSWJ 37 (2001), which contains some interesting responses from HWS members about the book.

heart-searching about 'life' lessen considerably. However, the influence of Jefferies on HW certainly did not lessen, as seen in his own writing and in his work to further Jefferies' name and reputation throughout his life. A letter published in the *Swindon Evening Advertiser*, dated 6 November 1958, from Mrs Gay, Chairman of the Richard Jefferies Society for many years, sums up our subject. The letter reads:



Today is the 110th anniversary of the birth of Richard Jefferies of Coate Farm.

Since his Centenary the standing of Jefferies both as a naturalist writer and mystic is being increasingly recognised. Henry Williamson, in his recently published *A Clear Water Stream*, describes him as 'spiritually the most piercing of writers upon the English country', and pays tribute to his influence, saying, 'If ever the dead befriended the living, Jefferies was my friend in youth.'

Professor Zaehner, Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, in his recent book *Mysticism Sacred and Profane*, devotes several pages to Jefferies. He says: 'Reference will have to be made to an outstanding English "natural" mystic of the 19th Century, Richard Jefferies, not so much because of the admirable word pictures in which he expresses his communion with nature as because he is one of the few nature mystics who advance a theory which seeks to reconcile his praeternatural experiences with the hard world of fact.'

FRANCES J. GAY

Chairman Richard Jefferies Society.

In 1925 HW visited Broadwater Cemetery (Worthing, Sussex) to seek our Richard Jefferies' grave. A gardener, recognising HW's 'look', told him where to find both Jefferies' and Hudson's monuments. This cameo makes a rather lovely connection between the spirits of these three men.



HW paying homage at the grave of Richard Jefferies. The memorial carved round the surrounding states: 'To the honoured memory of the Prose Poet of England's Fields and Woodlands'.

[The grave also commemorates Jefferies' wife Jessie, who is actually buried at Perranporth, Cornwall, and their son who died at a young age [Ed: as well as their son Harold and daughter Phyllis]. Today Jefferies' and Hudson's graves are looked

after with considerable dedication by Michael Parrott, a member of both the RJ and the HW Societies, for which we are all most grateful.].

In conclusion: that Jefferies had a passionate need to share his innermost feelings about the purpose of life through *The Story of My Heart* is obvious. It is an extraordinarily intimate book. Its message rekindled HW's own fire at a crucial moment. He spent the rest of his life striving to impart his own vision of life: of harmony—or balance—with the natural world and with each other. To see as the sun sees—without shadows and (quoting his Aunt Mary Leopoldina) 'The Master of Dream'.¹⁶

A final thought: when HW was the guest on BBC's *Desert Island Discs* (18 October 1969) his choice as the one book he could take with him to the island was: *The Story of My Heart*.

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A detailed—definitive—new biography of RJ is currently in preparation in 3 volumes by Andrew Rossabi: see *The Times Literary Supplement* 24.11.2017 (in review of new editions of RJ books). Volume I is published and runs to 800 pages.

The full background of HW's involvement with Richard Jefferies can be found on the HWS website 'A Life's Work' page under Jefferies.

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<sup>16</sup> HW's Aunt Mary Leopoldina (pseudonym, J. Quiddington-West) wrote in *The Incalculable Hour*: 'Thus it is that the Master of Dream comes to us in the Incalculable Hour' The influence of Aunt Mary on HW was considerable and is discussed in the essay on Francis Thompson (*HSWJ* 55, 2019, pp.24-45).