RICHARD JEFFERIES. A POPULAR INTRODUCTION TO HIS LIFE AND WRITINGS.

by Cyril Wright. Talk given to Swindon Branch W.E.A. June 19, 1975

> There are no damask roses now, like there used to be at Coombe Oaks. There are many grand roses, but no fragrance - the fragrance is gone out of life. Instinctively as I pass gardens in summer, I look under the shade of the trees for the old roses, but they are not to be found.
>
> I think, in despite of the nurseryman or cemetery keeper, I could get a damask rose .even now by enquiring from farmhouse to farmhouse---I have half a mind to try.
>
> But alas, it is no use, I have nowhere to put it; I rent a house which is built in first rate modern style, though small of course, and there is a 'garden to it, but no place to put a damask rose. No place because it is not home, and I cannot plant except around home.

So Richard Jefferies wrote in the first chapter of his novel *Amaryllis at the Fair*, upon which he was working when he lived at Lorna Road, Hove, and later at 14, Victoria Road, Eltham in Kent.

He was then in his middle thirties, and thinking about Coate Farm, near Swindon, his birthplace. He had only a few more years to live.

This novel, which I consider his best work of fiction, was the last book to be published in his lifetime. It appeared in 1887, and in the same year, after long suffering from a wasting disease, he died, at Goring-on-Sea, Sussex, before he was 39.

You might say that I am starting this talk at the wrong end, but perhaps it is more natural and revealing to view a man's life in retrospect, rather than following it through in the chronological order of events from birth until its end.

Richard Jefferies professed that time was something he did not understand. "Time has never existed," he wrote. "It is a purely artificial arrangement."

In his spiritual autobiography - *The Story of my Heart*, a work which he had been turning over in his mind since he was 17 years old, he expresses the idea that eternity is not a delimitation of the time process, beyond which you proceeded at death; but that it existed, here and now.

"It is Eternity now. I am in the midst of it. It is about me in the sunshine," are his words inscribed upon the sarsen memorial on Barbury Down. They were the thoughts that ran through his head, as he sprawled on the slopes of Liddington Hill, identifying himself in this timeless concept, with the Roman soldier buried in the hilltop tumulus.

So if we record that Richard Jefferies was born in Coate Farmhouse on Nov. 6th 1848, the second child of a Wiltshire farmer and his London-born wife, and that he died at Goring on August 14th 1877, we are saying in his own terms that in the great span of eternity, he spent nearly 39 years of it on this planet, leaving behind him for posterity, the treasured legacy of his thoughts and writings.

The Farmhouse had started its existence as a rambling thatched cottage in the early 18th. century. It was bought, along with 36 acres of land, on either side of the Marlborough Road, by Richard Jefferies, Baker , of The Square, Swindon, formerly of Moreden, from Thomas Herring of Stratton, in the year 1800, for £1100.

This Richard had a son John, who succeeded to the Bakery, and made the celebrated lardy cakes - "oblong and flat, crossed with lines, and rounded at the corners, made of dough, lard, sugar and spice," which no doubt taxed the digestion of generations of Swindon ploughboys.

James Luckett Jefferies, "Mr. Lardy Cake's" son and father of the writer, was settled in the farmhouse at Coate upon his marriage to Elizabeth Gyde, the daughter of an Islington bookbinder, in 1844. The cottage had already been added to; and James enlarged it still further. What we see today is mainly the additions and very little of the original cottage.

You should read *Amaryllis at the Fair*, for a picture of home-life at the Farm, described with engaging candour. At the same time, we must remember that, at the age of four, shortly after his elder sister had been killed by a runaway horse on the Coate Road, Richard's parents, who suffered by incompatibility of temperament and upbringing, sent him to live with an aunt and uncle at Sydenham in south east London. This aunt was a sister of Mrs. Jefferies; her husband was in the printing business. They were cultured people in comfortable circumstances, and with them young Richard spent the happiest years of his childhood, getting the sort of encouragement from books and a sympathetic environment that a boy of his serious pretensions needed.

He still spent his holidays at Coate, but his return home permanently at the age of 9 must have been a more drastic change in his life, than the earlier removal. Two brothers and a sister had come along in those six years. Schooling had to be arranged; the challenges of a houseful of children; a temperamental and eccentric father, and an overworked, complaining mother, all had to be faced or shrunk from.

Richard was not endowed with qualities of leadership, though he envied those who had them, and his assertiveness was based on a mental, rather than a physical superiority. If we read his classic of boyhood adventure - *BEVIS*, (recently published in an abridged, illustrated edition by Puffin Storybooks,) we get an excellent picture of the heroic , irresistible leader he would have liked to be - proud, disdainful, courageous, imperious, resourceful -dominating his companion, Mark, supposed to be a portrait of his brother, Harry, who really takes it all very well, and not without resistance.

Coate Water, now sadly depleted of fish, its very outlines and surrounding features changing as development proceeds, is the Great Sea of Bevis and Mark’s boat-building, intrepid explorations and island encampments. The River Nile (or Cole) feeds it at the eastern shore, and the Mississippi runs out by the northern dam, where the trees are coming down, to flow ignominiously now between Shaftesbury Avenue and Eldene. If you walk to the edge of the bank past the paddling pool and the oak tree where Capt. Caesar Bevis took council with his generals, you will soon come to the mini-cliff overlooking the water, where Caesar Bevis fell in a fierce encounter with one of Pompey's men in the re-enacted Battle of Pharsalia. And further away, in Hodson Bottom, you may decide which is the cottage where Bevis and Mark met the old lady,

whom they took to be a witch, and who let them feast, without magical results, upon her delicious gooseberries.

All his life, Richard Jefferies admired the great classical heroes, especially Julius Caesar, and he worshipped the beautiful women of history. He also had the itch to travel, emulating his father, who, in his youth, had worked his passage to America.

Richard and his cousin, James Cox, ran away to the Continent, hoping to reach Moscow, but owing to shortage of funds, having to be content with Paris. Upon returning to Britain, they decided to book a cheap passage on a ship bound for the States, but again their cash wouldn't run to it, and they were sent home from Liverpool by the police.

A third enterprise took Richard as far as Brussels, where he was enchanted as always, by the beauty of the women, their dress, and deportment; but at the same time dismayed at the sight of the wounded returning from the defeat at Sedan, in the Franco –Prussian War.

You may wonder what all this has to do with Richard Jefferies, famous nature-writer, and authority on the Victorian agricultural scene, author of such books, eagerly sought after today, as *The Gamekeeper at Home*, *The Amateur Poacher*, *Wild Life in a Southern County*, and *Round About a Great Estate*. It is true that upon such works as these, full of loving observations of plants, trees, birds, and animals, and alive with shrewd and sympathetic descriptions of country characters in all walks of life, much of his fame rests.

His literary success began with the publication in 1872 of his letters to *The Times* on the condition of the Wiltshire Labourer and his employers, and continued through the hundreds of articles which he wrote for magazines and newspapers, later collected for book editions.

But we do not have a complete picture of Richard Jefferies, if we do no more than read and enjoy, as indeed we must, these priceless and inimitable writings. We learn about the whole man, as much from his struggles, his aspirations, his hopes and his despair, as from his successes. For struggle he did, notwithstanding his local reputation as a dreamer and idler, preferring the knowledgeable companionship of Keeper Haylock of Burderop (you can see his cottage in Hodson, near the road) to the service of the mowing-machine or the threshing drum. His determination and his vision knew no bounds.

Home life was never easy, and when the days of courtship came along, the hefty Guardsmen brothers of his boyhood sweetheart, Jessie Baden of neighbouring Day House Farm, beat him up. All the same, he married her at Chiseldon Church when he was 25, and she was his loyal helpmate until he died. A farmer's son, he withstood the jeers of these who called after him as a "lazy loon," and took to journalism serving as reporter on the *Glos. & Wilts, Standard*, and the *North Wilts Herald*, predecessor of our present *Evening Advertiser*.

His early books were not about nature; they were novels, from the precocious and now highly amusing and revealing "Ben Tubbs' Adventures," written at the age of 17, to three long works of romantic

fiction, running in all to seven sizeable volumes. To get these into print, his ambition drove him to what all writers are advised not to do, he paid for their publication. So they appeared in hard covers one after the other in the space of three years, with the imprint of Tinsley Bros, of London, beautiful impossible heroines, romantic impossible young men, caddish impossible villains, and all doomed to failure, while his wife was struggling with rearing the first baby in rooms over a shop in Victoria Road, Swindon. Can you imagine it?

Although after they had moved in 1877 to Surbiton in semirural Surrey about 12 miles from the heart of London, cheques for his nature-writings began to offer hope for a brighter future, there were soon two more mouths to feed, and still Richard Jefferies could not throw away the belief that he was destined to be a front-rank novelist. He even tried to model his style upon that of established writers, in spite of sound advice to persist with his natural gifts. I suppose we never really abandon the dreams of our youth, or see, as others profess to do, their lack of substance.

Greene Ferne Farm, a short, slight novel, which owes more to its observations on nature and agriculture, than upon the rather inept plot and unconvincing characters, appeared in the same year as two collections of his articles - *Hodge and his Masters*, and *Round About a Great Estate*, the estate being Burderop. There seems little doubt that though the novel may have brought him deeper satisfaction, the other two books achieved what was sorely needed, some, useful, though always inadequate money.

At Surbiton, his pen flowed freely, his great output seemed to fulfil the claim that he made to his publishers, that the world would acclaim him because he had enough ideas in his mind for a dozen books. *Wood Magic*, a sort of fable in which the infant Bevis becomes the confidant of the wild creatures, and *Bevis* itself belong to this period. Furthermore, he had already started on the first draft of *The Story of my Heart*.

But misfortune and tragedy were not far away. *The Story of my Heart* which was so important to him had a mixed reception from the critics, and it did not sell well, though it is now regarded as his masterpiece.

With his health beginning to break down, the family moved around Sussex and Kent. At Eltham, their little boy, Oliver Lancelot, died of meningitis. This was a crushing blow, and it weakened much of the spirit needed to withstand his own illness. Nevertheless, he continued to write and publish. Three more novels appeared - *The Dewy Morn*, a romance with a typically idealised Jefferies-type heroine, perfect in physical form and of unassailable virtue; the political and social background being more acceptable than characters and plot. Then *After London*, a work of imagination and prophesy, which some present-day readers nave seen as a striking resemblance to the aftermath of a nuclear war. Finally the homely, delightful , though often confusing – *Amaryllis*.

All through the bright and the dark days of their married life, in all a brief 14 years, Jessie was his unfailing stay and companion. It was no

sinecure to keep the house absolutely quiet for that part of the day when Richard must write; to bear the relative poverty, to which as a prosperous farmer's daughter she was unaccustomed; to nurse him over long periods, and to write to his dictation when he was too weak to hold the pen. How fortunate Richard Jefferies was to have found such a wife.

The body of Jefferies was laid to rest in the large, quiet cemetery at Broadwater, about a mile from the seafront at Worthing. On the plinth which supports the stone cross his name, and those of his wife, and their three children are recorded. The youngest lived until 1958. I am happy to say that this memorial has recently been cleaned and restored to its original appearance at the expense of The Richard Jefferies Society, with the help of one of our members living nearly, and that it is our intention to plant on the grave a damask rose of a variety that would have been familiar to Jefferies in his lifetime.

Although, after they moved to London, Jefferies did revisit the Old House At Coate (to use the title of one of his essays,) it was a sad occasion, as his parents had been forced by the crippling effects of a mortgage, to move to Bath, where the father worked as a gardener. In the Museum at Coate may be seen the plan of the Estate, and the Sale Catalogue when the farm was put up for auction in 1877. After several changes of ownership, the house, and buildings and about 12 acres of land, were purchased by Swindon Corporation. The attic where Richard did his writing, and where the desk at which he worked can now be seen, together with the adjoining room, are the nucleus of a museum devoted to Jefferies and that other Wiltshire writer, and lover of the Downs, Alfred Williams of South Marston. The property is now administered by Thamesdown Corporation, who have plans to establish a Museum of Rural Life and Crafts, which will include the farmhouse, gardens and outbuildings, with their Jefferies' associations.

Jefferies had great affection for his adopted county of Sussex, but home to him was always Coate hamlet, its fields and streams, and the old farmhouse.

About a year ago, it was found necessary to fell a solitary elm tree, stricken with dutch elm disease, on the Park North estate, where I live. This tree had certainly stood there, perhaps one of a line of elms,, long before the houses were built. Though it wasn't old enough for Jefferies to have seen it on his rambles over the fields between Coate and Swindon, I like to think that it may have been the offspring of trees of which Jefferies wrote that "they put their arms together and became one." I was sorry to see it go.

"A hundred years ago," said Jefferies, in one of his last essays,"My Old Village," a favourite with many readers, "a little old man with silver buckles on his shoes used to walk along this footpath once a week in summer, taking his children over to drink milk at the farm." This was no doubt, Richard's grandfather. But now that the nine fields are covered with houses, with just a few trees and open spaces in between, greater poignancy is lent to this essay, in which, when he was far removed from

those scenes, he begins to question their existence, and fears, that were he to return, he would find them, if he found them at all, changed out of recognition.

> The map is lost, and it might be asked was there ever a map? The people are all gone. No one ever saw any particular sparkle on the brook there, and the clouds appear to be of the same commonplace order that go about everywhere. No one can find these footpaths, which probably led nowhere; and as for the little old man with silver buckles on his shoes, it is a story only fit for someone in his dotage...No one else seems to have seen the sparkle on the brook, or heard the music at the hatch, or to have felt back through the centuries; and when I try to describe these things to them, they look at me with stolid incredulity. No one seems to understand how I got food from the clouds, nor what there was in the night, nor why it is not so good to look at it out of the window. They turn their faces away from me, so that perhaps after all, I was mistaken, and there never was any such place or any such meadows, and I was never there. And perhaps in course of time, I shall find out also, when I pass away physically, that as a matter of fact, there never was any earth.

Richard Jefferies, Prose-Poet, Novelist and Mystic, returns in this essay, published after his death, to the theme of his place in Eternity.