RICHARD JEFFERIES AND ALFRED WILLIAMS: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

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AN INTRODUCTORY ESSAY READ TO THE ASSEMBLED MEMBERS OF THE 'RICHARD JEFFERIES SOCIETY' AND THE 'FRIENDS OF ALFRED WILLIAMS' AT THE WYVERN THEATRE, SWINDON ON MONDAY, 3 FEBRUARY 1992
[Reader Kaye Franklin of the FAW]

To begin with, may I welcome all the members of the RJS and FAW who are assembled here this evening to hear and discuss this brief essay concerning the similarities and differences between Alfred Williams and Richard Jefferies, the two writers, nature-lovers and social-commentators who have made this part of Wiltshire so very much their own; especially Alfred Williams. I hope these few notes will serve particularly to introduce members of the RJS to the life and writings of Alfred, who stands out as a shining example of heroic self-sacrifice in the pursuit of knowledge, literary excellence and self-discovery.

I have been asked to write this essay, despite the fact that pens more capable than mine could do the job more competently and so I crave the indulgence of the members here assembled.

I have been asked to provide an essay outlining the main differences and similarities between the two writers in whose honour you are gathered here this evening and who have made this corner of Wiltshire famous in literary circles and among people who value good nature-writing and poetry. Since, to do full justice to this subject would require an essay far longer than can be accommodated into a single evening's reading and discussion, I shall confine myself to describing the main points of similarity and difference between Richard Jefferies and Alfred Williams.

I'll begin with Alfred, since his life and writings may not be all that familiar to some of the RJS members. He was born in South Marston in 1877, the fifth of eight children. His father was a carpenter and joiner and also possessed an intellectual streak, as did his mother, who would compose poems to recite to her children and who was also a great nature-lover. These factors are of great importance in understanding Alfred's later development as a poet and author of books about country-life.

Richard Jefferies' background was somewhat similar. He was the son of a London book-binder's daughter and a Wiltshire farmer. Unlike Alfred's, Richard's mother was never really happy in the country.

Oddly enough, both mothers were named Elizabeth and both fathers were noticeably clever with their hands. In addition, two of Richard's uncles were in the printing, engraving and bookselling trades, so young Richard had plenty of access to books and read voraciously, probably much more than Alfred did at the same age.

Though both were born into farming communities, Richard did not take to farm-work and, after leaving school at about 15, appears to have spent much of his time snaring hares and generally exploring the surrounding countryside before beginning work as a reporter on the 'North Wilts Herald' at the age of 17.

However, Alfred loved it and, when he left school at the age of 11, he worked full-time on local farms for four years until he joined the GWR in 1892, when he was 15. Henry Byett, Alfred's first biographer, records Alfred saying of this period that, "At the age of eight I half-timed from school and worked in a gang for the farmer, pulling weeds and thistles from the wheat. At other times we scared birds, tended pigs and worked in the hayfield or at corn-harvest. To me it was a period of much happiness *(probably the happiest period of his whole life - AJ),* and when I consider the particular qualities of my own parents, of the farmer who employed us and those of my companions at that time and afterwards and compare them with the present produce, I am not at all convinced that, though we are better-educated, there is the same amount of honesty, kindness and determination."

Richard Jefferies was to become a professional reporter and author, writing novels, essays, social-commentaries and papers on various antiquarian subjects, but at this early period, he had not yet found his true voice as a nature-essayist.

Alfred's literary career was destined to follow a remarkably different path. Though he had many of the same traits, interests and inclinations as Richard, he had not, at this time, discovered his fellow country-man's writings. His passionate love of literature -especially poetry and the Latin and Greek classics, began to develop around 1897 and, from then on, he pursued his studies avidly. He embarked upon a massive course of literary study, including English Language and Literature, Latin, Greek and French. All of this learning was acquired during his 'free' time, for he was working 12 hours a day at the GWR. He even evolved his own unique methods of study, and managed to master the languages he studied with ease.

He was passionately fond of poetry and, it was in this medium, that he began his career as an author. His first book 'Songs in Wiltshire' was published in 1909 (when he was 32) to much critical acclaim. One critic said that the book contained "beautiful thoughts and language;" while another said that "His songs are as true and honest as the daily toil by which he earns his bread". Here is an extract from one of the poems in that collection, 'On the Downs', which tells of his longing to become one with his beloved hills:

> "O for ever thus to mingle,
> One in spirit and in mood,
> With the darling downs and dingle,
> While my pulses tremble, tingle
> With the teaching of my blood.
> Still to find and still to follow,
> Joy in every hill and hollow,
> Company in solitude.
> Here is health and true devotion
> All my want and all my need,
> Richer, vaster than the ocean
> Beauty, perfect rest and motion
> Balmy blossom, scented reed;
> Nature's bonded mystic union,
> And a deathless, dear communion,
> With the world's immortal seed."

Alfred's phrase, "One in spirit and in mood" can be applied equally well to his and Richard's shared love of the Down-country and to their regarding the hills as companions. In fact, Richard expressed similar thoughts in some of his Sussex-

essays. In "To Brighton" he wrote, "There is always hope in the hills", while in "The breeze on Beachy Head" he said "Discover some excuse to be up there always, to search for stray mushrooms - they will be strong, for the crop is gathered extremely early in the morning - or to make a list of flowers and grasses; to do anything and, if not, go always without any protest. Lands of gold have been found and lands of spices and precious merchandise, but this is the land of health."

So here we have Alfred in verse and Richard in prose, extolling the beauty, solitude and healthfulness of the Wilts and Sussex Downs. But how ironic it is that both of these men should write about lands of health, when both of them endured much chronic ill-health for much of their tragically short lives and both were to die prematurely, before attaining to the fullness of their powers.

It was in 1909, when Alfred was 32, that he first made the acquaintance of Jefferies, of whom he had not previously heard. This fact is astonishing when one realizes that these two writers were born in places only three miles apart and that both of them shared many common characteristics. Alfred records his introduction to Jefferies in the book which he wrote about his native place, "A Wiltshire Village".

> "There was no ploughed land attached to the farm, so the master used to purchase a few acres of standing corn - wheat, oats or barley - away up on the downs, on Wanborough Plain, at the foot of Liddington Hill; that is how I first came to go there *(in 1889, when he was twelve - AJ).* That was 23 years ago this very autumn and two years after the death of Richard Jefferies, the great nature-writer, of whom, peculiarly enough, I had never heard until a few years ago, and none of whose writings I had seen until I was several years past thirty. Then by chance a new friend, a Londoner and an enthusiastic admirer of Jefferies, and a poet, sent me one of his books to read and introduced me to that wonderful personality who was born and who lived in such close proximity to the village (South Marston).....you may imagine that the world
> and, especially this corner of it, has not been quite the same to me since; it is fuller and richer, more wildly and riotously beautiful than ever.

Unfortunately for posterity, Alfred omits to tell us the title of the book which was sent to him and the name of the friend who sent it; information which would have been of much value in forming a valid conception of Alfred's reaction to the writings of Richard Jefferies. There are other instances in which Alfred 'leaves the story unfinished'. For example, in "Villages of the White Horse", Alfred quotes the following story about Woolstone Church:

> "Strange use has been made of village churches before now; in the time of the wars, and during the plague; as places of refuge and safety, and they are still turned into conveniences for someone or other who chances to be in need. A short while ago the caretaker of the tiny church, going to renovate the fires between services one Sunday, surprised a tramp in the act of cooking his dinner on the grating above the heat-pipes; there were the fat rashers of bacon frizzling and spluttering; the building was filled with the savoury odour of hog's flesh."

But one longs to know the outcome of the story: was the tramp turfed unceremoniously out of the church, or praised for his resourcefulness? We shall never know.

This same failing can be detected in Alfred's comments about Richard in a conversation which he had with his friend and future biographer, Henry Byett, on the subject of nature-writing, and the excellence of nature-articles in daily papers:

> "They are written, no doubt, by men of the Universities. People may say what they like about 'Varsity men, but their training gives them an immense advantage. They have a sublime subtlety, combined with complexity, which we self-taught writers do not possess. Subtlety we

> may have, but not the same fine subtlety and complexity which marks the ‘Varsity training. Richard Jefferies wrote some good stuff, but not all of it was good. Page after page is poor and his work is not in as great a demand as formerly. You can go into a field and write a whole book about that field but it won’t grip the reader quite through. To do that, you must introduce human interest, in the form of the labourer or someone else."

But which pages of Jefferies' writings did Alfred consider to be poor? He may have been referring to the early novels, which are generally held to be inferior (/ *cannot comment upon them personally, as I’ve not read them - AJ),* because in another remark about literary veracity, he said, "One can only write faithfully of what one has lived. Richard Jefferies was for this reason at his best when he wrote about nature". Alfred must have rated Jefferies very highly as a nature-writer, because he also said, "I shall never equal Jefferies". But Alfred could produce some very profound and evocative nature descriptions. Interspersed among the plain, matter-of-fact accounts of village-life and lore which comprise the bulk of his country-books can be found passages such as the following extract from "Round About the Upper Thames" in which he is describing one of his favourite rivers, the Coln:

> "Of these tributaries, the Coln is the most beautiful. It is like a lovely laughing bride, crowned with flowers on her marriage-morning; fresh, sweet and pure, radiant with happiness, whose face, kissed with the morning sunshine, sends a gleam through the world and rejuvenates everything, shedding a new glory - ‘the light that never was’ - on all around her, and adding an unspeakable *(not the most suitable word to use in this context - I would have used the word ‘ineffable’ - AJ)* gift - a moment of immortality. And how lightly and gaily she trips along, with feet that seem not to tread the ground, moving half on earth and half in the air, with a graceful, jaunty, bird-like motion that only blithe-hearted youth could execute, bewitching in her exquisite ease, and simple, natural loveliness!
> Even so beautiful is the Coln, swimming along over her stony bed through the fields, laughing aloud in the sunlight, flowing, flowing, ever flowing clear and pure as though composed of nothing but freshest dew-drops, each one resplendent with the morning, twinkling in the glorious light of the unutterable dawn-hours. The smile on her face, the musical ripple of her voice, the sweet pouting of her lips when the stones oppose her passage, the shadow no sooner received than dispelled, the snow-white foam-flakes borne like bunches of lilies in her breast, her long, flowing hair streaming in the crystal, the graceful and voluptuous sweep of her skirts at yonder curve, the silver sandals of her restless, gliding feet, her gauze-like garments of the summer-fields, green and gold, white, opal and purple, the flash of multi-coloured light reflected from the plumage of her attendant kingfishers, her joy and bloom and perfect beauty are all-powerful and irresistible. Heaven is in her eyes; laughter is in her soul, the spirit of youth is about her, and she has no secrets. She is a symbol of life at its earliest and holiest hours, when the earth is newly awake and full of sunshine and song, and all things are freely and easily fathomable; before Sorrow’s fruit hangs on the bough, the heavens are overcast, and we draw near to the depths that conceal who knows how many pains and afflictions, filled as they are with the doom of ourselves and all other earthly things."

In the foregoing extract, Alfred describes in elegant and loving prose the soul of a river, and attempts to discover its mystical aspects, its relationship to its setting, and to the sky and the sun, and its hidden message for himself. While Alfred writes about the Coln as a mystical, living entity - a soul-mate - Jefferies in his essay, "The River", describes the rich flora and fauna to be found in and alongside the Thames in the vicinity of London. But it also contains the following passage of pure descriptive prose:

> "Perhaps the river is sweetest to look on in Spring-time or early Summer. Seen from a distance the water seems at first sight, when the broad stream fills the vision as a whole, to flow with smooth, even current between meadow and cornfield. But, coming to the brink, that silvery surface now appears exquisitely chased with ever-changing lines. The light airs, wandering to and fro where high banks exclude the direct influence of the breeze, flutters the ripples hither and thither, so that, instead of rolling upon one lee-shore, they meet and expand their little force upon each other. A continuous rising and falling, without a line of direction, this breaks up the light, not with sparkle and glitter, but with endless silvery facets."

Such passages as the above, may well have inspired Alfred's nature-writing, for while Richard's description is rather less mystical than Alfred's, both examples quoted are constructed in a very similar fashion.

The former railway-works at Swindon provide another important link between Richard Jefferies and Alfred Williams, but with one striking difference and that is, whereas Richard toured the works, and wrote an essay describing the various processes carried on therein, together with a few comments about the employees, Alfred was to work at the GWR for 22 years (1892-1914), and write an entire book about the factory and his experiences there. His book, "Life in a Railway Factory" appeared in 1915 and caused a considerable stir. One wonders what Richard would have made of Alfred's book had he lived long enough to read it. Richard's essay had appeared in 1875, "The Story of Swindon", and here is what he had to say about the employees at the works:

> "Of the men themselves, the majority are intelligent, contrasting strongly with the agricultural poor around them, and not a few are well-educated and thoughtful, ... full of information on every subject, obtained from newspapers, books, conversation, lectures and travel, for," says Jefferies, "most have at least been over the greater part of England" and are "probably higher in their intellectual life than a large proportion of the middle-classes." He declares that the Mechanics Institute is "always full of readers; the library, now an extensive one is always in use. Where one book is read in agricultural districts, 50 are read in the vicinity of the factory."

In this passage, Jefferies appears to portray the workforce of the GWR of his day as (mainly) morally upright, hard-working and activated by a common desire for intellectual and cultural advancement, under the (mainly) benevolent supervision of the GWR. He also states that the men's demeanour and morality had improved markedly in recent years. But whatever may have been the position in 1875, a quite different state of affairs is portrayed in Alfred's hard-hitting and important book. Few working-class people write books about their experiences in factory or shop, and for this reason alone Alfred's book is a valuable social document. It describes, in graphic prose, the often harsh and appalling working conditions in the GWR and of the brutalizing effect of such conditions on the men. As can be imagined, Alfred, the self-taught linguist, poet and nature-loving writer, suffered much persecution in such a forbidding environment.

Alfred belonged to the WEA and wrote courses for it, and he would have been pleased to know that his railway-book has been used by the Open University for one of its courses. Here are some extracts from Alfred's observations of his fellow workers. For example, he states that village-workers are "better-natured, better-tempered and more hard-working than those who are town-bred, whatever they may lack in intelligence and knowledge of things." Regarding the treatment of young boys in the works, Alfred declares that some of the workmen are "Guilty of almost criminal behaviour in their dealings with young boys. They use the most filthy language in their presence, teaching them to

swear and sometimes producing obscene books and pictures for their perusal". Quite a different picture from that portrayed by Jefferies, Alfred's remarks about workers' education are also very revealing, and as I also work in a factory and have done all my working life, I am convinced that his observations are accurate. He says, "It is superfluous to say, moreover, that the cleverest man is not the one usually advanced; that would be contrary to all precedent at the factory. He is more usually the very individual to be kept under". It is as well to remember that many Victorian employers considered literacy to be a greater vice than drunkenness among their workforces, and disapproved of their employees being more well-educated than it was considered their status warranted. Alfred himself left school at 11, which was commonplace among working-class children. To Alfred, the atmosphere of the railway sheds was unsympathetic and demoralizing and he says that, if a worker genuinely possesses culture when he arrives at the sheds, it is soon effaced and swallowed-up in such an atmosphere. Though my working conditions are nothing like as harsh as Alfred's were, I know that what he says is true, because all my working life I have endeavoured to initiate my fellow workmates into the superior joys of literature, music and appreciation of natural and man-made beauties, but with very little success. Indeed, I have been regarded as an idiot for my efforts. Alfred's efforts at self-improvement resulted in his being much derided and persecuted by his colleagues and (worse still) by officials at the works. He remarks,

> "As for general culture, it may at once be said that the educated man is not wanted at the factory. What is more, the managers will not have him if they can by any means avoid it; there is a great antipathy to him on the part of the staff in and out of the shed. Where a workman is known to possess any intellectual ability above those commonly found, and has the courage to raise his voice in any matter, or to interest himself in things pertaining to the town, or if he has in any way access to the ear of the public, he is certain to be marked for it; at the first convenient opportunity he will be shifted off the premises. Every workman who desires to improve himself in any direction other than that which tends to promote the interests of the company is looked upon with suspicion; he is immediately included in the number of undesirables!"

Because Alfred was an employee of the works, his comments are likely to be that much more accurate than those of Jefferies, although Jefferies' remarks may have been true at that time. In this respect, his premature death was a tragic loss, for had he lived to, say 75, he would undoubtedly read Alfred's book and the two men would have met and recorded their impressions and opinions of each other's works for posterity.

To attempt to compare the lives and careers of two such men as Alfred Williams and Richard Jefferies, and include a varied and sufficient number of quotations from their writings, is to attempt the near impossible in a short essay such as this. One cannot hope to do full justice to such a wide subject within such circumscribed limits. The Swindon writer, J B Jones - a great friend and champion of Alfred - was scarcely able to do so in twenty essays, in his excellent books, "Williams of Swindon", and so I hope that my contribution will not be received too unfavourably.

To end with, some brief comments about their main similarities and differences.

Both of these men were nature-lovers and social commentators, and both wrote articles for various newspapers, but whereas Jefferies became a professional reporter and a novelist and essayist, Alfred was a self-taught writer and linguist who mastered Latin, Greek, French and Sanskrit - translating into English poems and stories in all these languages - and who produced five volumes of beautiful poetry; much of it extolling the virtues of nature and his native county, and his superb masterpiece, "The Testament" which is the story of his heart and in which he records his innermost thoughts.

Like Jefferies, Alfred was also much interested in the history, customs and folklore of his native region and he recorded his observations in his books, "Villages of the White Horse", "A Wiltshire Village" - which is devoted entirely to South Marston - and "Round about the Upper Thames". Another book, "Round about the Middle Thames" was serialized in a Berks newspaper but was never published in book form. Alfred also published a collection of folk-songs. Unlike Jefferies, Alfred seems to have had but little regard for the novelist's art, preferring to write fact rather than fiction, but he is believed to have written one novel, "The Steam Hammer Shop", based on his experiences at the GWR. It has never been published, if indeed it was ever written.

Both Alfred and Richard were strongly attracted to Liddington Hill and to both of them it was a sacred place, where they could be alone with their thoughts and commune with nature. Alfred's "bonny high hill" occurs many times in his poems, and in his railway book he describes it as "the holy-of-holies of Richard Jefferies, who spent days and nights there trying to fathom the supreme mystery (life) which has baffled so many great and ardent souls".

The fact that both of these solitary, mystically-inclined men should have been attracted to the same spot, many years apart, testifies to the power of certain places to influence sensitive and receptive people. Liddington Hill is for ever consecrated to these two geniuses.

Although both RJ and AW were desperately poor all their lives and moreover endured much ill-health, both of them despised wealth and ostentatious materialism. For example, Alfred wrote in his poem "The Testament" (Stanza 11):

> "I can bear my burden cheerfully and smile under it; I do not exalt myself.
> I have no desire of riches, nor of honour, I enjoy all naturally
> I am the heir of all that I see; that is my possession;
> And the things that are eternal and invisible are mine also."

And this from Jefferies:

> "The pageantry of power, the still more foolish pageantry of wealth, the senseless precedence of place; I fail words to express my utter contempt for such pleasure or such ambitions." (From "Story of My Heart")

It is only to be expected that they should think thus, for their riches were of a far higher order; riches of the intellect, mind and spirit, and their outlook was the true one, for they have bequeathed to us a legacy of imperishable literary wealth.

An examination of their religious beliefs would require an essay to itself. Alfred was reared as an orthodox Anglican, but, like Jefferies, underwent agonies of doubt. He went through a five year period of agnosticism which he described as "the blackest time of my life", but he returned again to orthodox Christianity. Two

poems, "The Voyager" and "Futurity", described this period perfectly. Here are the opening lines from "The Voyager":

> "Long years in an underworld I trod Dark valleys beneath a sunless sky Till, guided by the Spirit's rod I took the changing paths whereby We turn unto the feet of God."

But this new-found faith in Christianity was to give way when he was sent to India during the war, where he discovered the fantastically rich, cultural and religious heritage of the East. His studies of Mohammedanism and Hinduism were, he says, "A revelation to me".

Jefferies' religious position is even less easy to define. He seems to have been an irregular churchgoer and to have become disenchanted with the orthodox religion of his day, as his strange book, "The Story of My Heart" tells us. For reasons which I have not discovered, Alfred regarded this book as inferior. Jefferies' religious beliefs became the subject of fierce discussion after his death, despite the fact that his last words on earth were Help, Lord, for Jesus' sake. Had he, too, returned to the 'fold' in his final years?

In one of his final notebooks, Jefferies made a comment which would have applied equally to Alfred, "Three great giants are against me - disease, despair and poverty".

And the day before his own death at the end of eleven terrible years, Alfred said to his wife, who was dying in hospital, "My dear, this is going to be tragedy for us both". And it was. He died the following day. He had been a great admirer of, and a worthy successor to, Richard Jefferies, whom he so resembled in many ways, although the form which their writings took differed.

If I have concentrated more on Alfred Williams than on Richard Jefferies in this essay, it is because he has been overshadowed by his more well-known fellow countryman and author and because I regard him as an even more fascinating personality, on account of his self-education, and his astonishing range of intellectual interests. I know that I have not been able to do anything like adequate justice to these two extraordinary writers, but I hope that these unworthy remarks of mine will be received not too unkindly by most of you assembled here this evening, and that you will be encouraged to discover more about the lives and writings of Alfred Williams and Richard Jefferies.