The 1992 Birthday Lecture given to the Richard Jefferies Society by the President, Mr Andrew Rossabi, on Saturday, October 3rd, 1992, at the Surbiton Library Annexe.

RICHARD JEFFERIES IN SURBITON 1877-1882

Surbiton, suburb — the words sound alike and there was a period between the wars when Surbiton was firmly rooted in the popular mind as the archetypal suburb, the exemplar of sedate bourgeois respectability. It even became something of a national joke, like East Cheam or Neasden. At the mention of Surbiton most of us, I suspect, have a mental snapshot of Southern Region commuter-land, of Shell executives and City businessmen travelling to and from Waterloo, of a railway station above all. Few of us, I imagine, would ever dream of visiting Surbiton for its own sake: we know it not so much as a town or place as a station name, like Swindon, a stop one always passes through and never gets out at, a mere point or staging-post on the way to more alluring places further south and west. At least I know that when I came here for the first time, to scout what Edward Thomas called Jefferies' 'second country' in preparation for this talk, I felt I was doing something rather strange, exploring territory uncharted by virtue of its very ordinariness. In fact Surbiton has some good buildings and a most interesting history.

Suburbia evokes images of long rows of semis with bay windows and Mock Tudor gables and names like 'Lynton' or 'Belle Vue' or 'Mon Repos', a George Bowling *Coming Up For Air* sort of world of trim privet hedges and close-shaven lawns, of laburnum and lilac and chammy cypress trees, of shirt-sleeved men hosing down their cars on Sunday afternoons: a world by no means lacking in poetry and magic as John Betjeman and the Belgian surrealist painters Rene Magritte and Paul Delvaux have demonstrated, but such a far cry from the world of books like *Bevis* and *The Amateur Poacher* that at first sight it seems almost incredible that their author should have chosen to live here. For if we equate Surbiton with suburbia, then we associate the name of Richard Jefferies with the downs, the bare, open, rolling chalkhills of southern England, and with the spirit of the wind on those hills, sish-sishing through the dry bents on the hill-fort ramparts or rustling through fields of golden wheat, the 'fresh and wandering air' as he called it in his autobiography, the magical outdoor spirit which so captivated the young Edward Thomas, born, by an 'accidentally cockney nativity', in the South London suburbs and which was epitomised for him by the closing words of *The Amateur Poacher*: 'Let us get out of these indoor narrow modern days, whose twelve hours somehow have become shortened, into the sunlight and the pure wind. A something that the ancients thought divine can be found and felt there still.' (*AP*, 352.)

For Thomas the words became 'a gospel, an incantation' and in his fragment of posthumously-published autobiography he pinpoints the initial appeal Jefferies' books held for him, as celebrating values almost the exact opposite of those of prim suburban propriety against whose pricks Thomas kicked.

> What I liked in the books was the free open-air life, the spice of illegality and daring, roguish characters — the opportunities so far exceeding my own, the gun, the great

> pond, the country home, the apparently endless leisure — the glorious moments that one could always recapture by opening the *Poacher*... Obviously Jefferies had lived a very different boyhood from ours, yet one which we longed for and supposed ourselves fit for. He had never had to wear his best clothes for twelve or fourteen hours on Sunday. Enforced attendances at church and Sunday school could not have been known to him. The crowd parading in their Sunday-best clothes along the walks of the Commons was impossible in that southern county. (*CET*, 134-5)

But not in Sydenham, and it is worth emphasising that Jefferies was no stranger to suburbia, or villadom as he disparagingly termed it. He had spent most of the years between four and nine at Shanklin Villa, the imposing Sydenham residence of his aunt Ellen and uncle Thomas, and continued to visit Sydenham at fairly regular intervals for the rest of his youth and early manhood. The Harrilds were religious, the aunt especially so, and they early tried to inculcate in the boy, perhaps in a conscious counterbalance to the free and easy life they knew him to lead at Coate, middle-class values and habits which included going to church on Sundays and eschewing outlandish hats. The importance of the Harrilds to Jefferies' early development can hardly be exaggerated, for they virtually played the part of surrogate parents. Jefferies' own parents were emotionally largely unavailable to him: his mother, Betsy Gyde, was a nervous, bustling, town-bred woman temperamentally unsuited to life on a small, unprofitable farm, and seems to have shown the boy little warmth or affection, while the father, James Luckett, was a proud, independent, crotchety and often gruff and surly man devoted to his fruit trees and potato patch and garden, which he had turned into a veritable Naboth's vineyard. Nevertheless, with certain qualifications, which he himself emphasised in his *Life and Work*, Thomas's youthful image of Jefferies was an accurate one: Jefferies was a true son of the soil and in his books he celebrated the values of a life lived in the open air, in close contact with nature. His attitude to suburbia was scornful. 'Villadom. Comfortable and contemptible.' (*N*, 38) Perhaps his feelings are best summed *up* by Bevis's comment on visiting a trim suburban villa: 'Don't think much of <u>your</u> garden... No buttercups.' (B, 425)

So why did Jefferies choose to live in Surbiton, what brought him here? The short answer is we don't know for sure, because he doesn't tell us. But we can reasonably surmise that it was in order to advance his career. In 1876 Jefferies' career was at the cross-roads. Most of it he spent at Shanklin Villa with his widowed aunt Ellen, while his wife Jessie and their year-old son Harold remained behind in Swindon Old Town, where the Jefferies had been living since April 1875. This was the bitter time to which he refers in *The Story of My Heart ,* 'when it was necessary to be separated from those I loved'. (*SH*, 62) About the reasons for the separation we can now only speculate. Thomas says 'he must have gone up to find a suitable house near London, yet at the edge of the country, and to make sure of his journalistic connection'. (*RJ*, 102)

The attention attracted by the three *Times* letters on the condition of the Wiltshire labourer in 1872, and more particularly by a fourth letter entitled 'The Future of Farming' published in *The Times* and favourably discussed in a lengthy leader column on 15 October l873, had helped launch Jefferies on a career as an agricultural journalist. 'The Future of

Farming' in fact was the title of his first contribution to *Fraser's Magazine,* which was published in December that year and elaborated on the arguments contained in the *Times* letter. Between the years 1873 and 1877 Jefferies contributed a number of lucid, cogent, and singularly well-informed articles on farming topics to such prestigious publications as *Fraser's,* the *New Quarterly*, the *Standard,* and the *Fortnightly Review.* The articles were on the general theme of the far-reaching changes which agriculture had undergone during the previous fifty years through mechanisation, increased foreign competition, the formation of labourer's unions. Jefferies called on farmers to adjust to the changes, to realise that farming; was no longer a pastime for gentleman amateurs but a highly competitive and commercial industry like any other. The age of agri-business had arrived.

The transition from provincial reporter to national journalist was thus more or less complete. During this period, however, Jefferies devoted the bulk of his energies to his fiction, on which he continued to pin his hopes of winning fame and fortune in spite of the critical and commercial failure of *The Scarlet Shawl* (1874) and *Restless Human Hearts* (1875), both published by Tinsley Bros, the former partly at the author's expense. The choice of Tinsley was significant. William Tinsley, who had published the early fiction of Thomas Hardy and Anthony Trollope, had a reputation as the publisher of such bestselling authors as Miss Braddon, William Harrison Ainsworth, and the journalist George Augustus Henry Sala; his list was 'frankly on the lighter and more sensational side'.[1] Jefferies wrote at least four other novels about this time: 'Only a Girl', which was successively offered and rejected by Tinsley, Longmans, and Bentley between February 1872 and February 1873; a two-volume rural novel entitled 'In Summer Time' which was unsuccessfully submitted to Bentley in February l876 and to Tinsley in May 1877, and appears to have been an early version of *The Dewy Morn*; *The Rise of Maximin*, which was probably offered to a publisher (perhaps Tinsley) and ended up as a serial in the *New Monthly Magazine* between October 1876 and July 1877; and *World's* End, a three-decker written during the winter of 1875/6 and published by Tinsley in July 1877, after being rejected by Macmillan, to whom it had been submitted in July 1876.

Presumably, given all this activity, Jefferies wanted to be closer to his Fleet Street editors and publishing contacts in Paternoster Row while at the same time retaining a foothold in the country. Nature had long been the focus of his spiritual aspirations and was increasingly becoming a source of literary inspiration, particularly in his novels and short stories which, though often inept and lacking deftness, in Thomas's words 'satisfied and kept alive for the time being the spiritual something in his nature as competent articles on agriculture could not do'. (*RJ*, 48)

Another, more negative, reason for the move may have been a desire to escape from Swindon. Jefferies the obscure, struggling provincial reporter had compensated for his humble position by grandiose dreams of literary success and Swindon he regarded as too narrow and constricting a stage for his soaring ambitions. He found his work or the *North Wilts Herald* and *Wilts and Gloucestershire Standard* there uncongenial and under the name Sandover castigated the town in his novel *The Rise of Maximin* as 'that cruel heartless place which had treated him so roughly, and despised him a

presumptuous fool'.[2] His dislike of the town extended to country society generally. In 1870 after his Brussels trip he wrote to his aunt Ellen: 'I cannot say that I admire the country much after London, and the still more elegant Brussels manners... I shall never be happy in the country again.' In the fragment 'Hyperion', which Samuel J. Looker dates *circa* 1875, he anathematised Wiltshire as 'the rudest and most illiterate county of the West'.[3] Nor did his opinions change after the move to Surbiton. A notebook entry for 16 June, 1879, reads: 'Countryside. Its narrow pettiness. Suddenly changed to London and discovered its extraordinary pettiness and locality' (*N*, 57).

Perhaps, too, Jefferies was half-consciously obeying some atavistic instinct. Both his paternal and maternal grandfathers had worked as young men for Richard Taylor, printer of Red Lion Court. His uncle Thomas Harrild was a letterpress and lithographic printer in Shoe Lane. Thomas tells us that as a child Jefferies also visited the workshops of another uncle, Robert Harrild, 'variously described as printer, manufacturer of printing materials, publisher and bookseller, in Farringdon Street and in Great Eastcheap'. (*RJ*, 26) Although Jefferies prided himself on being an autochthon, a true son of the soil, descended from many generations of farmers and small landowners in Wiltshire and Gloucestershire, it was, as Thomas remarks 'country blood with a difference':

> both Gyde and Jefferies had been dipped in London, and had followed there the trade of printing; and though old John Jefferies the grandfather, retired early, and not quite contentedly, to the mill and the bakery and the farm, and Charles Gyde 'of Islington' was buried in Pitchcombe churchyard, they had been troubled by this change from the fields to Fleet Street and back again. (*RJ*, 289)

Jefferies' writings give many signs of the attraction London held for him and for any ambitious young journalist London meant Fleet Street, which in *Amaryllis at the Fair* is called variously 'the cerebellum of the world', 'the Mind of the World', and 'the centre whence ideas flow outwards'. Whoever had once come under its influence, he wrote, could never get out. (*AF*, 120-1) And that Jefferies had fantasies of influencing public opinion, passages in the early novels like *The Scarlet Shawl* make clear. There his hero Percival Gifford, 'a detestably conceited puppy',

> really thought that it was his mission to instruct mankind. All the old books of religion were wearing out; the Vedas, the Koran &c. were out of date. He began to seriously contemplate writing a modern Koran. (*SS*, 177)

Most obviously of all, Jefferies was treading the legendary path of the countryman going to the city in search of his fortune, following a pattern of migration which became accelerated in the industrial age, the railway increasing the mobility of the working population and facilitating the movement from country to city. In 'A Barn' in *Nature Near London* Jefferies commented on the prevalence of itinerant labourers on the farms about Tolworth. It was not to be expected that Jefferies himself should be immune to the historical changes he observed with often uncanny prescience in the world about him.

1876, then, marked a turning-point in Jefferies' career. The note-book for 1876, the first extant, has been transcribed, a truly herculean labour, by John Pearson who has placed a copy in the Swindon Reference Library. Covering the period from early May to mid-July, it consists largely of ideas for articles, stories, titles; worldly aphorisms; names of contacts and plans for advancing the author's career. Perhaps significantly, there are no nature notes. The entries make depressing reading, not only because Jefferies is so clearly out of sorts ('Never been so unhappy as this time' reads one entry) but because, with the advantage of hindsight, we can see that he was spending his energies in the wrong direction and being false to his true self. The last entry reads: 'assert yourself boldly with the newspapers. If you don't do so you are immediately forgotten — continuously assert yourself: this is the golden rule. Every day, every day, every day.' Comments Pearson:

> The overall impression created by the notes is one of a man who is desperately seeking his niche as a writer. His search follows two separate avenues: first, he is concerned to find settled, steady employment as an essayist and short story writer for the magazines and newspapers; secondly, he is seeking a formula which will ensure his success as a novelist. (JP, 494)

There is even a hint (though I stress this is highly speculative) of a possible rift with Jessie. If there was, the *casus belli* was very probably Jefferies' chronic inability to provide an adequate income to support his family. The arrival of the baby could well have exacerbated already existing tensions. For the truth was that after ten years of constant endeavour, Jefferies had precious little to show for his efforts, apart from the small but important success he had scored with the *Times* letters and the agricultural articles placed with *Fraser's* and elsewhere, which had brought him honour and prestige but little money. In financial terms his situation remained desperate and desperation is the keynote of the 1876 notebook.

1876 itself was a qualified success. Certainly proximity to the capital seems to have helped Jefferies place his work. In 1876 he published two farming articles in *Fraser's* and the *New Quarterly;* a pamphlet of ponderous political satire, *Suez-cide!!; The Rise of Maximin;* three self-improvement pieces in *Cassell's Family Magazine;* 'Gawdy as a Garden' and 'The Midsummer Hum', two bucolic tales in the *Graphic* whose rural setting and Wiltshire dialect look forward to *Greene Ferne Farm;* three trashy society pieces in the *World;* a romantic short story in *London Society;* and 'A Summer Day in Savernake Forest' in the *Globe,* an essay in the promising vein opened by 'Marlborough Forest' and 'Village Churches' the previous year. But though spreading his talents and energies in too many directions at once Jefferies was getting warm. The ingredients were there. All he needed was to combine the disparate elements into a single satisfying whole. The first hint of what was to come is found in a letter he wrote to Oswald Crawfurd, the editor of the *New Quarterly,* who had asked Jefferies for a series of natural history articles. In his reply where, as Thomas remarks, 'he expands more than he usually does' Jefferies said it would give him much pleasure to write such a series of articles. He had been correcting his notes and thought he could write a whole book about the reservoir at Coate. 'I should not attempt a laborious, learned description, but rather choose a

chatty style. I would endeavour to bring in some of the glamour — the magic of sunshine and green things and calm waters — if I could.'[5]

By the end of 1876 Jefferies had also secured the first of his two main objectives, regular journalistic employment. Sometime towards the end of the year he was offered work as a leader writer on the *Live Stock Journal* to which, apart from a few breaks, he contributed a regular weekly column between January 1877 and October 1878. The *Live Stock Journal* was a quarto weekly journal published by Cassell and Jefferies' connection with the paper may have come about through his contributions earlier that year to *Cassell's Family Magazine*. Samuel J. Looker, to whom belongs the credit for first identifying Jefferies' articles in the *Live Stock Journal,* which appeared anonymously or under a pseudonym, and who published many of them in *Field and Farm,* thinks it probable that Jefferies' work for the magazine was one of the factors which helped him make up his mind to leave Wiltshire for Surbiton. (*FF,* 11)

The move from Swindon, effected by February the following year (1877), acted as trigger or catalyst. By physically removing himself from Wiltshire Jefferies returned to it in memory and imagination and so found his true subject at last. The flood gates were opened and the books poured forth in a torrent, like a *roman fleuve.* On 12 December 1877 the first section of a two-part article entitled 'Poaching as a Profession' appeared — in Frederick Greenwood's *Pall Mall Gazette* rather than Crawfurd's *New Quarterly.* In W.J. Keith's words: 'Though neither Jefferies nor anyone else knew it at the time, this was the beginning of a series of articles that were to transform him from a rather desperate, obscure journalist to a recognised authority on country life.[6]

For Jefferies had not been uprooted so easily from his native Wiltshire. However much he may have disliked the narrowness of village and hamlet life, and despised the parochialism of Swindon society, he was rooted in the North Wiltshire country about Coate, 'not to be detached from it any more than the curves of some statues from their maternal stone' (*RJ,* 1). A notebook entry for 7 December 1883 reads: 'No one can ever be far from the place where he was born: distance is not separation.' (*N,* 159) It is significant that all the books which Jefferies wrote while living at Surbiton, with the exception of *Nature Near London,* have a Wiltshire setting.

But I anticipate. Sometime between December 1876 and 23 February 1877 the family was reunited and the Jefferies moved into rented premises at 2 Woodside, Ewell Road, Surbiton. The rent was £28 per annum. Strictly speaking, 2 Woodside was not in Surbiton but in Tolworth (spelled Talworth in Jefferies' day), a hamlet in the adjacent parish of Long Ditton.[7]

Surbiton answered Jefferies' dual needs perfectly. It was 12 miles from London, to which the L&SWR (London and South Western Railway) provided a fast and frequent service, the journey taking 31 minutes, the second-class single fare being 1s 6d, yet was surrounded by what was still unspoiled country. Ironically Surbiton was in its way as much a railway town as Swindon, owing its sudden growth to the arrival of the London and Southampton Railway in 1838. It is said that Surbiton owed its rise to the fears of Kingston. For news of the proposed railway caused the conservative burghers of royal Kingston to throw up their hands in alarm, lest the stage-

coach trade, a major source of income to the town, Kingston being the hub of several turnpike roads, be threatened. They could not prevent the construction of the railway but they did succeed in forcing it right away from the town, a mile or so to the south, to Surbiton Hill at the very bottom of the parish, through which the London and Southampton (later the London and South Western, the arch rival of the Great Western) was forced to dig an expensive cutting.

Surbiton Hill was a small scattered hamlet with a population of under 200. It consisted of two mansions, two farms, two brick-fields, a windmill, a handful of cottages, and rough commons of heath and furze. Soon after the arrival of the railway, the price of land shot up and the property speculators moved in. One, the enterprising Thomas Pooley, a Kingston maltster, was chiefly responsible for the early development of the town. In 1839 he purchased most of the Maple Farm estate which covered an extensive area between the railway and the Thames and began to lay out streets and build elegant, stuccoed villas. But Pooley overstretched and had his fingers burned: the bankers Coutts foreclosed and took over his half-completed estates. The spate of building continued and by 1871 Surbiton — at first known as Kingston-upon-Railway or New Kingston — was a thriving residential town with a population of over seven-and-a-half thousand, promoted by Victorian estate-agents as the Queen of the Suburbs. By 1881 the population was 9416; by 1901 over 15 thousand.[8]

The house rented by Jefferies stood right on the outskirts of the town, along the Ewell Road. In the summer of 1907, 25 years after the Jefferies had left, Edward Thomas visited it to gather material for his biography. He found Woodside

> a small block of whitish, stuccoed, flat-fronted houses of two stories, just beyond the last shops and just before Douglas Road, on the right-hand side of the Ewell Road as you go to Tolworth by the electric tram. No. 2 is the second house towards Ewell, and has a poor small fir behind the railings of the front garden. (*RJ*, 102)

The railings have been replaced by a low stuccoed wall and the fir — possibly the Scots fir or pine whose boughs 'nearly reached to one window and which was visited by a goldcrest during the winter of 1880/1 — has gone in the photograph of the house taken in 1946 for the Worthing Cavalcade volume of tributes edited by Looker. The house, renumbered No 296 Ewell Road, is now three-storied, not two; has a front porch; and wears a rather battered, patched-up air, showing signs of the damage it sustained during the war, presumably from the same bomb which completely destroyed its next-door neighbour. In 1977 Cyril Wright visited Ewell Road and found No 296 had been converted into a Chinese take-away and become 'part of a row of small modern shops'.[10]

The premises are now occupied by D.J. Murphy Ltd., publishers of *Pony* and *Horse & Rider* magazines. The external fabric of the upper two floors, now offices, seems fairly intact: the windows with cambered heads appear identical to those in the Worthing Cavalcade photograph. But it is not clear what alterations had already been made to the building since Jefferies' day. There is no plaque, no record of Jefferies having resided and written many of his best-known books here. No 294 next door is the Kum Hong Chinese

take-away. This stretch of the Ewell Road is a busy shopping precinct. On the other side of the road stands Surbiton Police Station in yellow brick with ogive windows, part of a complex of such buildings, one dated 1880. They were once a school. The Ewell Road is built up as far as Tolworth Broadway, the skyline dominated by Tolworth Tower, a 1960s 22-storey slab-shaped office block above a Marks & Spencer food store. The tower is described by Pevsner as 'one of the most obtrusive landmarks in this part of Surrey'. The rural character of Tolworth, a hamlet mentioned in Doomsday, was largely destroyed when the Kingston by-pass was opened in 1927; it has since become part of outer London suburbia. The lanes and fields and hedgerows described so minutely and lovingly by Jefferies have all but vanished.

Already in 1907 Edward Thomas found No 2 Woodside had been 'overtaken by London for some time', while the 'flat, elmy meadows' around Tolworth Farm had 'a dejected and demoralised air of defeat by the city'. But he noted that the from windows of 2 Woodside had 'a swelling, leafy view of Hounslow, Richmond Park, and Wimbledon Common on one side, and of Hook, Chessington, Claygate, and their woods, on the other'. At Tolworth Court Farm there was 'a good row of conical corn-ricks, and a tiled barn with pigeons above, and a reedy pond, where the Ewell Road bends just before crossing the Hogsmill river by an elm-shaded bridge' — the bridge where Jefferies watched the trout. In general, Thomas found it 'a deep, quiet country' and surmised that in Jefferies' day 'it had still more rural elements left' (*RJ*, 102-3).

A comparison of the 1868 OS map with a modern reveals the extent of the changes. Open fields have given way to streets and houses. But there are small pockets of resistance to the urban invasion, one or two remnants of former farmland, little green nooks and crannies. The Hogsmill River is one. I came expecting to find it discoloured with effluent and choked with litter. It proved a bright, clear, slow-flowing stream, so shallow for much of its course that it hardly deserves the name of river. But though no longer so deep as in Jefferies' day it still runs 'clear and sweet', is still 'too broad for leaping over', still wears an inhabited look, is still tenanted by moorhens and water-rats. I could not see any trout but there were plenty of sticklebacks. In summer cow parsley, balsam, comfrey, nettle, hogweed and goosegrass grow waist-high along the banks, which are overhung by hawthorn, alder, elm, sallow and crack willow. For part of its course, between the by-pass and a railway viaduct carrying the branch line from Raynes Park to Chessington, the river flows through what looks like former meadowland. The occasional rattle of a train over the viaduct intensifies, rather than disturbs, the silence.

Upstream, beyond the viaduct, a path leads up past Manor Court Farm with old red brick buildings and a row of whitewashed cottages to the Old Maiden parish church of St John the Baptist. The plain tower of red brick laid in English bond is early 17th century, the flint chancel medieval. There is a lychgate and holm oak, yew and ash in the churchyard. Thence the path joins Old Maiden Lane — Nightingale Lane, according to Thomas — a pleasant green road winding high above the Hogsmill hidden behind a thick screen of trees down to the right. The road passes what were once the Worcester Park Gunpowder Mills. The Old Mill has a projecting first storey and a weathercock of horse and covered wagon. The road, here called

Worcester Park Road, meets the Kingston Road by Tolworth Court Bridge. The Hogsmill here marks the boundary between the boroughs of Kingston and Epsom & Ewell. The low white rails, the aspen under which Jefferies rested, the withy bed with the sedge warblers, have gone. The bridge, rebuilt in 1939, has been widened to carry a dual carriageway. Graffiti are scrawled under the single arch. Apart from the non-stop noise of the traffic, it remains a pleasant spot. There is in counterpoint the continuous sound of falling water from a change in the level of the stream, a soothing sound inducing a dreamy, contemplative mood. Just beyond the bridge on the downstream side the long, almost prostrate, branch of a willow hangs athwart the stream. Himalayan balsam, comfrey, nettle, bramble, and woody nightshade cover the banks. The stream is here not deep enough to require Jefferies' method of looking through water; it is clear, shallow, and golden. On the other, upstream side of the bridge there is a stile beside which grows alkanet with intense blue flowers. The river, deeper here and fringed with flags below the bridge, skirts a wide field foaming with cow parsley in May. Pylons briefly march in step with the river which winds away to the south west. A small group of girls were collecting grass in yellow Royal Mail bags for their ponies.

Back the other side of the road, a cluster of derelict farm buildings just north of the bridge once formed part of Tolworth Court Farm. Some charred timbers are the remnants of the old barn which was destroyed by fire in 1969. This was probably the original of the barn described by Jefferies. Here also, through a screen of elder, may be glimpsed the stagnant, scummy pond, once part of the moat of To1worth Court, where the anglers in 'A Brook', eschewing the bright stream behind, sat or stood 'grave as herons' fishing for perch and eels. The pond is now choked with flags and reeds. The entrance to the rickyard lies off the Old Kingston Road, shaped, in Cyril Wright's words, 'like a horse's hind leg'[11] and providing a welcome haven from the traffic hurtling along the Kingston Road. Two notices, one each side of the gate, announce FRESH EGGS and BEWARE OF THE DOGS! The only dog I could see was a fox staring at me round the corner of a building with broken windows.

When I revisited the farm three months later, there was a demolition sign up and the site was encircled with a new wire mesh fence. The charred beams of the barn had been removed. The field behind the farm has relapsed joyously into barbarism and is overgrown with thistle, dock, mayweed and nettle. The paths of the former irrigation ditches mentioned by Jefferies in 'A Brook', can be traced by the rows of reeds and bullrush, some growing over seven feet tall. Here also are fleabane, great willow-herb, and teasel. Beside the flags clustered round the pond grow water mint and gypsywort — the latter has whorls of tiny white labiate flowers spotted with purple round a square stem. Legend has it that the gypsies extracted a dye from the leaves with which they blackened their faces in order to pass as Egyptian or African story-tellers.

It was late afternoon on a day in mid-August. The robin had begun his autumn song; the thistledown attracted charms of goldfinches; there were the shouts of children playing in the distance. The sun was sinking, a fiery ball in a pearl-grey sky. There was the sense of approaching evening and

autumn. It was one of those moments of stillness and peace in nature which not even the non-stop traffic could utterly abolish or destroy.

So much for the scenery. The five-and-a-half years Jefferies spent at Surbiton were among the happiest and most productive of his life. The move to Surbiton proved a turning-point in his career. Here, in an astonishing burst of creativity, he wrote the books — *The Gamekeeper at Home* and its successors — which, if they did not make him immediately famous, established his reputation as a fresh and original writer with a remarkably intimate and detailed knowledge of nature and rural life and an uncanny gift for sensuously transporting the reader into the heart of the scenes he depicted. They were received with applause by reviewers and public alike. Wrote Edward Thomas:

> With little arrangement, but with the charm of exuberance and freshness, he poured out his stores of country knowledge. There had been unlettered men who knew much that he knew; there had been greater naturalists and more experienced sportsmen, more magical painters — at least, in verse — of country things; but no one English writer before had had such a wide knowledge of labourers, farmers, gamekeepers, poachers, of the fields, and woods, and waters, and the sky above them, by day and night; of their inhabitants that run and fly and creep, that are still and fragrant and many-coloured. No writer had been able to express this knowledge with such a pleasing element of personality in the style that mere ignorance was no bar to its enjoyment. When he wrote these books — *The Amateur Poacher* and its companions — he had no rival, nor have they since been equalled in purity, abundance, and rusticity. The writer was clearly as much of the soil as the things which he described. In his books the things themselves were alive, were given a new life by an artist's words, a life more intense than they had had for any but the few before they were thus brought on to the printed page. (*RJ*, 291-2)

Here he wrote the culmination of his agricultural studies, *Hodge and His Masters,* which provides a magnificent panoramic view of English farming during the early years of the great depression; the best of the early novels, *Greene Ferne Farm,* a slight but fresh and charming bucolic which Q.D. Leavis compared favourably with Hardy's *Under the Greenwood Tree;* and the children's stories *Wood Magic* and *Bevis*, where he expressed his mystical feelings of oneness with nature at length for the first time in the final chapter of *Wood Magic* where Bevis converses with the wind and in the chapters on the summer dawn and the night sky in *Bevis.* Here his daughter Jessie Phyllis was born in December 1880 and his son Harry spent his early childhood. Here he earned enough for himself and his family to be comfortably off, if never rich. But all these books were either set in Wiltshire or based on his imaginative recreation of his native county, although Jefferies had no compunction about using his Surbiton notes in some of the early country books, notably the second half of *Wild Life in a Southern County.* To discover his response to his immediate environment in North Surrey, we have to go to *Nature Near London,* which though written at Surbiton was not published in volume form until 1883, when Jefferies was living in West Brighton, where he had moved in July 1882.

Nature Near London is *a* collection of articles reprinted from the *Standard,* a London conservative- newspaper. Priced 1d, the *Standard* was the oldest of the cheap dailies and the ancestor of the *Evening Standard,* which until recently retained the typeface of the original *Standard* masthead. To quote

one newspaper historian, 'it idealised the frank stupidity of country gentlemen, and represented the cultured opinions of peers of the realm'.[12] It was nationalist to the backbone, full of John Bullish spirit, but by the 1880s under its able editor Mr. W.H. Mudford had become more tolerant and broad-minded. It prided itself on its coverage of foreign affairs and boasted that there was not an European capital where the *Standard* was not represented by its own correspondent. During the Afghan war it paid £800 for a single cable despatch. Among its war correspondents was G.A. Henty, the bestselling author of boys' adventure fiction who produced an abridged version of *Bevis* in 1891. Its offices, like those of the *Evening Standard,* were in Shoe Lane. The *Standard,* if we can accept the evidence of *Amaryllis at the Fair,* was the newspaper read by Jefferies' father;(*AF*, 15) to it Jefferies had originally submitted the letters on the Wiltshire labourer later published by *The Times.* It had previously published the *Hodge and His Masters* series.

The articles appeared unsigned, most under the rubric 'Rural London' followed by the title of the individual article, filling two or more columns on the left side of page two. There were 19 articles in all. 'Wheatfields', the first, appeared on 17 August, 1880; the last, 'Round a London Copse', on 26 December, 1882. The majority were published during the autumn of 1880. Two of the papers printed in *Nature Near London,* 'A London Trout' and 'Magpie Fields', did not appear in the *Standard;* at least, no trace of them has been found there or elsewhere. They may have been added because the original *Standard* articles were insufficient to make a volume of sufficient length. Jefferies rearranged the order of the articles for the book and made a number of minor alterations. For example, the article 'Anthills. Adders' was retitled 'Heathlands'. The number of paragraphs was increased, presumably to avoid the deterrent effect on the reader of large blocks of type. Otherwise the articles appeared as printed in the *Standard.* The exception was 'A Brook', the last two paragraphs of which were rewritten, probably for the sake of continuity with 'A London Trout', the sequel introduced in the book but which did not appear in the *Standard.* In the *Standard* version 'A Brook' ends with Jefferies looking over the parapet of the bridge one morning and seeing a second trout beside the first:

> behold, there was a second trout, much larger, certainly not less than two pounds in weight, side by side with my friend. Until now it had seemed as if there was but one fish in the stream. It was pleasant to look at them; but the meaning was plain. Very shortly afterwards the arch was deserted; look as carefully as I would, there was no fish there — the pair had departed together.

Nature Near London was first submitted to Macmillan in October 1882, before the last of the articles had appeared in the *Standard.* Macmillan sent the ms to their reader John Morley for a report. Morley, who had succeeded Frederick Greenwood in 1880 as editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette,* was a fervent supporter of Gladstone, of whom he wrote the standard biography. A decade or so earlier he had reported on Hardy's early novels, which Macmillan had declined. His report on *Nature Near London* was unfavourable:

> These papers are excellent examples of the writer's vein, and strike me as quite equal to his previous work... But then the vein, so far as public interest in it goes, must be considered to have been entirely exhausted... It is all chaffinch and peewit... Some of the

> pieces…are mere padding for a daily paper, and are not far removed from trash. It will not succeed, I am sure.

On 21 October Macmillan returned the ms with a polite letter of rejection.

Jefferies next submitted the ms to Cassell who accepted it for publication. However Jefferies withdrew the ms in January 1883 after a dispute over terms. The book was to be illustrated and Jefferies was angry when he discovered that instead of commissioning new pictures Cassell intended to use second-hand illustrations from back numbers of their periodicals and blocks already in their possession. Previously Cassell had used the cost of the illustration: to justify their offering royalties only after a sale of 1500 copies. Jefferies had been induced to sign the contract on that basis but as he now discovered that the illustrations would cost Cassell nothing and were 'of the poorest quality' he refused to consider the contract valid unless they also paid him royalties on the first 1500 copies. Cassell evidently refused, for Jefferies withdrew the ms of *Nature Near London*[15] and offered it to Chatto & Windus. Chatto offered £50 for the copyright, a paltry figure beside the £150 Jefferies had received for *Round About a Great Estate* and the £300 for *Hodge,* but after some haggling he accepted the terms. The Cassell episode is instructive because it contradicts the image of Jefferies as the lanky dreamer and shows that he was a shrewd businessman who could even cut up rough to defend his interests. The dispute seems to have done no permanent damage to Jefferies' relations with the firm for a few years later in 1885 Cassell published his futurist fantasy *After London.*

Proofs were sent out in March and *Nature Near London* was published on 5 April, 1883, price 6/-. It was reviewed in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, *St James's Gazette*, *Athenaeum*, *Saturday Review*, *British Quarterly Review*, *Academy, Spectator*, *Chamber's Journal*, and *Harper's New Monthly.*

The reviews were almost uniformly favourable and quite as enthusiastic as those which had greeted the earlier books. The *Pall Mall Gazette,* for example, considered the book the equal of any that had gone before and although it thought the three Sussex essays at the end had 'more of the old open-air feeling about them than the others' found all the essays 'instinct with that minutely artistic power in sketching from nature in the most careful detail which forms Mr. Jefferies's characteristic gift'. The *Athenaeum* said the papers broke new ground and particularly praised Jefferies's 'keen and suggestive' response to the pictorial qualities in the London atmosphere. The *Saturday Review* thought *Nature Near London* in some respects the most interesting book Jefferies had produced and singled out for praise his faculty for 'exact and minute' observation, calling him 'the Meissonier of those who paint with words'. It -praised his ability to find so much gold in everyday, common-sights overlooked by the majority. Like many, the reviewer was especially charmed by the story of the London trout, which however he said ought to have been told in one chapter, not two. He acutely remarked that although the book was called *Nature Near London,* it described an area a good way from London and considered by most Londoners to be in the country. We may acquit Jefferies of any intention deliberately to deceive but the misleading impression which was perhaps conveyed by the book's title was certainly reinforced by the pictorial cover which showed a prospect of London, with the dome of St Paul's in the

distance, as if seen, say, from the slopes of Hampstead Heath. The *British Quarterly Review* took up another favourite theme of the reviewers, when it stressed Jefferies' merits as a pleasant and informal teacher of natural history. It praised his ability to sit still like Thoreau, until the smallest creature revealed itself to him. The sole dissenting voice came from *The Academy* which warned Jefferies against overstocking his market and said that 'his present book, though it might have sufficed to make the reputation of another writer, is a variation upon its predecessors rather than an advance.'

The almost unanimously glowing reviews; Jefferies already secure reputation; the novelty and interest of the subject matter; and the simple but memorable title, with its pleasant alliteration: all these must have helped the book's sales which were apparently brisk, for a reprint was necessary a month after publication in May and this was followed by another within the year. During the first 30 years of its life *Nature Near London* remained one of the most popular of Jefferies' titles, appearing in over 15 editions and impressions. After 1913, however, its popularity suddenly waned. W.J. Keith thinks the decline in the book's popularity may have been caused by the growth of London which 'had changed this particular area of Surrey beyond recognition, that it could no longer be offered as a guidebook'.[16] Almost a quarter of a century passed before Phoenix issued a new edition in 1937, followed by the Pelham Library edition in 1941. Then there was another long gap until 1980, when John Clare Books produced a facsimile of the first edition with an introduction by the ornithologist and country writer Hockley Clarke. Clarke was a society member who lived in Surbiton. For 36 years he edited *Birds and Country* magazine. He founded the Surbiton & District Bird Watching Society and was largely instrumental in persuading the Kingston Council to name the Oakhill Bird Sanctuary after Richard Jefferies.[17]

Nature Near London was the first of Jefferies' books to be presented as an undiluted collection of newspaper articles without any attempt, as Jefferies had made in the case of the *Gamekeeper* and other series, to knit the individual papers together into a more or less continuous narrative divided into chapters. This became the procedure for the rest of his life. *The Open Air* and *The Life of the Fields,* also published by Chatto, were volumes of similarly collected journalism — poured neat, so to speak — save that they were culled from a variety of sources whereas the essays in *Nature Near London* all originally appeared in one newspaper, the *Standard.* W.J. Keith attributes the change to Jefferies' illness.[18] This had the disastrous effect of simultaneously reducing his literary output and involving him in the expense of doctors' fees, which quickly eroded his savings. However there is evidence that at one time Jefferies did contemplate a more unified book along the lines of its predecessors. A notebook entry for 30 May, 1881, reads: 'R.L. [i.e. Rural Life] The Surbiton Year from 79 to 81. Each place described, and place and date. Also birds (*N*, 112.) Bird observations feature prominently in *Nature Near London* but otherwise Jefferies did the exact opposite of the plan outlined here. Save in the most general terms he did not localise or date his descriptions and explained why in the preface, the longest and most elaborate to any of his books.

There Jefferies states the book's central theme — the abundance of wild life, particularly bird life, to be found close to London. He then explains why he has not indicated the precise locality — 'the exact hedge, the particular meadow' — where he made his observations. First, he says, because no two people find the same things beautiful. Secondly, because these things are dependent on fugitive effects of 'season, time or weather'. 'How could I arrange for you next autumn to see the sprays of the horse-chestnut, scarlet from frost, reflected in the dark water of the brook? There might not be any frost till all the leaves had dropped.' Everyone, declares Jefferies, must find their own locality. 'To traverse the paths day by day, and week by week; to keep an eye ever on the fields from year's end to year's end, is the one only method of knowing what really is in, or comes to them.' Yet though his preconceived ideas were overthrown, in time he came to understand that there was something missing:

> In the shadiest lane, in the still pinewoods , on the hills of purple heath, after brief contemplation there arose a restlessness, a feeling that it was essential to be moving... This was the unseen influence of mighty London. The strong life of the vast city magnetised me, and I felt it under the calm oaks. The something wanting in the fields was the absolute quiet, peace and rest which dwells in the meadows and under the trees and on the hilltops in the country. Under its power the mind gradually yields itself to the green earth, the wind among the trees, the song of birds, and comes to have an understanding with them all. For this it is still necessary to seek the far-away glades and hollow coombes, or to sit alone beside the sea. That such a sense of quiet might not be lacking I have added a chapter or so on those lovely downs that overlook the south coast.

Jefferies followed his own advice. Apart from the three Sussex essays at the end, most of the material for the book was gathered in the course of his daily walks around his immediate neighbourhood in Tolworth, with forays slightly further afield to Oxshott, Claygate, Chessington, Kew, and the Thames above Teddington Lock. Sir Walter Besant, who describes Jefferies as a man of 'extremely simple and regular, even methodical habits',[19] tells us that he took two walks every day, one at half past eleven after his morning's work, returning for lunch at one o'clock, the other at three in the afternoon, returning at half past four. Besant says Jefferies went out whatever the weather and in all seasons'.[20] He was no armchair or fair-weather naturalist.

I don't think it adds anything to our appreciation of the essays to know the exact place or places they describe, although it may satisfy legitimate curiosity. Many were identified by Charles G. Freeman in an article 'Richard Jefferies at Surbiton' published in the *Surbiton Times* in 1896.[21] At that time it was still possible to visit them, although even in Freeman's day hardly one had escaped change. Edward Thomas derives his locations from Freeman's article (which he lists in his bibliography) but differs from him in one or two cases. Interestingly, in some of the .papers describing the Tolworth area but not included in *Nature Near London* and not published until after his death, Jefferies does name names, e.g. in 'The Spring of the Year', 'The Last of a London Trout', 'The Coming of Summer', and 'The Seasons in Surrey'.

'Woodlands' describes Woodstock Lane from Long Ditton Church to Claygate. The deeply-rutted green lane is Prince's Lane and the silent wood bereft of bird-life in August is Prince's Covers. 'Footpaths' describes the

footpath from Chessington Church to Ruxley Farm. 'The veritable hamlet' is Chessington. The Ewell Road is described in 'Flocks of Birds' and again in 'Nightingale Road', according to Freeman, but Thomas identifies the latter as 'perhaps the lane from Old Maiden Church to the Kingston Road'. 'A Brook' and 'A London Trout' describe the Hogsmill river; the bridge is that by Tolworth Court Farm. About 'A Barn' there is some disagreement. Freeman, H.K. Springett[22] and Cyril Wright[23] all say it was the Tolworth Court Farm barn beside the Kingston Road just north of Tolworth Court Bridge. Edward Thomas, however, who knew this barn for he mentions it in his description of the farm ('a tiled barn with pigeons above') was not so sure and suggests the original was ' perhaps on the road from Hook to Leatherhead, up Telegraph Hill' (RJ, 105). The gorse-bushes and copse on Tolworth Common were the setting for 'The Crows', the firwoods of Oxshott Common near Sandown for 'Heathlands'. 'The River' describes the Thames above Teddington Lock. The copse of 'Round a London Copse' stood between the Ditton Road and gardens of Woodside; the wooded hollow with two ponds where Jefferies saw the kingfisher was along the lane from Woodstock Lane to Ditton Hill; and the neglected but beautiful orchard was at the corner of Langley Avenue and Ditton Hill. The locations of the other essays are either too generalised to be identifiable (e.g. 'Wheatfields') or indicated in the text.

Nature Near London is the first of Jefferies' books in which the focus is almost entirely upon nature. Jefferies says that the first spring he resided in Surrey he was 'fairly astonished and delighted' (35) at the amount of bird-life everywhere. He had never known so many nightingales. One warm May morning he would hear four or five singing at once in the birch copse along the Ewell Road. He saw more spotted woodpeckers than in 'far distant and nominally wilder districts' — one of his many periphrases for Wilt shire. One afternoon his hat was nearly taken off by a brace of partridge skimming low over a hedge. He watched a sparrowhawk dash among a flock of sparrows feeding in a wheat field and seize a victim. 'It was done in the tenth of a second. He came, singled his bird, and was gone like the wind' (30). Kestrels were almost common. Once on Surbiton Hill he saw a hawk-like bird which 'from the gliding flight, the long forked tail, and large size' (31) he supposed to be a kite. Never had he seen such numbers of bird in the stubble fields in autumn, 'incredible numbers of sparrows, chaffinches not to be counted, thousands of greenfinches'. He watched a pair of herons sail over the fields towards the Thames 'in their calm serene way'. A withey bed beside the Hogsmill was more resorted to by sedge-warblers than any place he knew in Wiltshire. Stone-chats perched on the furze bushes of Tolworth Common opposite the house, which were also visited by linnets. Once Jefferies put up a snipe from one of the rushy pools. Pied and yellow wagtails ran along the sandy shore of a pond by the roadside; reed buntings came to the willows which bordered it. One morning in a wooded hollow where there were two ponds, one each side of the lane, a kingfisher came shooting straight towards him 'and swerving a little passed within three yards' (161). He tells us they were becoming rare by the Thames.

The copse adjoining the back gardens of Woodside was visited by pheasants which sometimes strayed into the neighbours' gardens. Early in the March mornings he woke to the 'three clear, trumpet-like notes' of a

missel thrush ringing out from the copse. From his window in the evenings he could hear partridges calling. An isolated ash-tree in the field by the copse was visited by cuckoos which sometimes flew over the house and whose call became as familiar as the chirp of a sparrow. One spring a pair of starlings nested in the gutter, the rain dammed up and flooded the corner of the house. 'It cost half a sovereign to repair the damage, but it did not matter, the starlings had been happy' (157). During the winter of 1880/1 a goldcrest regularly visited a Scots pine whose boughs nearly reached a window of the house, 'his golden crest distinctly seen among the dark needles of the fir' (159). A pole across a streamlet at the copse edge was the favourite perch of a robin who chased off any wagtail which ventured near. A pair of shrikes nested close by. Jefferies saw one dart down and dash a dandelion to the ground, 'his prey probably a humble-bee which had settled on the flower'. In June greenfinches never ceased lovemaking in the elms 'and lovemaking needs much soft talking'. Bullfinches were rare in Jefferies' locality but said to be common nearer town. The only birds he missed were the corncrake and grasshopper warbler.

> These birds are so characteristic of the meadows in south-western counties that a summer evening seems silent to me without the "crake, crake!" of the one, and the singular sibilous rattle of the other. (48)

But he found them another season.

Nature Near London was, so far as I know, the first book to take as its subject the wealth of wild life to be found in the outer suburbs of London and Jefferies the first to point out that birds and flowers do not need what are usually considered suitable — i.e. rural — habitats in order to thrive. 'Birds,' he decides, 'care nothing for appropriate surroundings' (166) and 'when people go into the country they really leave the birds behind them' (35). He was the first to observe how successfully wild flowers had adapted to the sides of railway cuttings and embankments, where they could flourish undisturbed, bordering the line 'like a continuous garden':

> Driven from the fields by plough and hoe, cast out from the pleasure-grounds of modern houses, pulled up and hurled over the wail to wither as accursed things, they have taker, refuge on the embankment and the cutting.
>
> There they can flower and ripen their seeds, little harassed even by the scythe and never by grazing cattle. So it happens that, extremes meeting, the wild flower, with its old-world associations, often grows most freely within a few feet of the wheels of the locomotive. Purple heathbells gleam from shrub-like bunches dotted along the slope; purple knapweeds lower down in the grass; blue scabious, yellow hawkweeds where the soil is thinner, and harebells on the very summit; these are but a few upon which the eye lights while gliding by. (207)

'Before a dandelion has shown in the meadow,' he remarks, 'the banks of the railway are yellow with coltsfoot.' 'The note of the cuckoo sounds above the rushing of the train.' He noticed how shrikes and kestrels used the telegraph poles and wires as observation posts and launch-pads from which to pounce on their prey. In a footnote added to a later essay, 'Sunlight in a London Square', to justify its inclusion in a book entitled *The Life of the Fields* he wrote: 'The sunlight and the winds enter London, and the life of the fields is there too, if you will but see it' (*LF*, 205).To Jefferies belongs the

credit, through a series of articles written for a popular newspaper, for opening the eyes of Londoners and suburbanites to the abundance of wild life about them. *Nature Near London* has had many honourable successors — W.H. Hudson's *Birds in London* (1898), R.S.R. Fitter's *London's Natural History* (194), and more recently Richard Mabey's *The Unofficial Countryside* (1973).

Mabey has taken Jefferies' initial idea and pushed it further. In masterly fashion he shows how successfully wild life has adapted to a variety of urban habitats, thriving among docks, reservoirs, railway cuttings, factories, allotments, golf courses, bomb sites, sewage farms, churchyards and canals. Of course much depends on the calibre of the observer. Most of us, because we do not expect to see anything, walk about blind to the wild life about us in the city. As Mabey remarks, 'You can walk down a town street in summer past a dozen exquisite wild plants and see not one.'[24] The needs of the natural world are more humble and prosaic than most people realise, as Mabey makes plain in his preface:

> A crack in the pavement is all a plant needs to put down roots. An old-fashioned lamp-standard makes as good a nesting-box for a tit as any hollow oak... Every patch where the concrete has not actually sealed up the earth is potential home for some living thing. So willing are wild creatures to make-do with even the most marginally familiar habitats, that a stone curlew, a dwindling bird of open downland and dry heaths, was once found nesting up in a children's sand-pit in Kilburn. [25]

It must be admitted that the naturalist will learn nothing very new from Jefferies' observations, although some now have a historical interest: we learn, for example, that the wryneck and the shrike, rare birds in our day, were common enough in his. Some passages hardly rise above the level of rambling and desultory nature notes, lending point to W.E. Henley's often-quoted charge that Jefferies was 'bent on emptying his notebook in decent English'.[26] Edward Thomas said 'this informal chit-chat, addressed chiefly to the amateur naturalist, became an easy habit with Jefferies' (*HV*, xxv). Perhaps too easy: occasionally one is almost forced to agree with Geoffrey Grigson that there is an 'ordinariness and softness' in Jefferies that 'tunes with the huge body of easy writing about the English countryside'.[27] The naturalist might quarrel with Jefferies over one or two points, such as his denial of mimic powers to the sedge-warbler, attested by most ornithologists. Sometimes he is not as exact as one would wish. He tells us that he saw more spotted woodpeckers in Surrey than in Wiltshire but omits to mention whether he means the greater or lesser spotted variety or both. Similarly he does not distinguish between the red-backed and the grey shrike. But these are quibbles, and in general Jefferies is a model observer, curious, careful, precise and reliable. He does not claim to be a professional naturalist, indeed he had little time for 'lists, and classifications, and Latin names' (*OHC*, 131), although he did not deny they had their uses, and he was too much of an artist not to feel the limitations of the scientific method. 'So many, many books and such a very, very little bit of nature in them!' (*FH*, 23) Commenting on the apparent lack of flowers in Surbiton compared with the south-western counties, he stresses that his remark 'are written entirely from a non-scientific point of view':

> Professional botanists may produce lists of thrice the length, and prove that all the flowers of England are to be found near London. But it will not alter the fact that to the ordinary eye the roads and lanes just south of London are in the middle of summer comparatively bare of colour. (48)

Again, Jefferies was not writing for the naturalist but for the general urban reader to whom his disclosure of the bountiful wild life to be found on the outskirts of London came as something of a revelation, to judge by the excited and enthusiastic response of the reviewers. But it is not only the opening of Londoners' eyes to the wild life on their back doorstep, so to speak, that made the book so valuable, although the importance of Jefferies' message that nature was all about us had we but eyes to see and ears to hear, that it was not necessary to go haring off into the depths of the country to find it, that it was best to begin near home, in one's own immediate neighbourhood, can hardly be overstated. It was a theme he never tired of repeating, as can be seen from the advice he gave to the would-be amateur naturalist in the preface to the Scott Library edition of Gilbert White's *The Natural History of Selborne,* one of the last pieces he wrote:

> Be very careful not to go too far; keep round the skirts of home near the garden, or in the nearest field, else you will jump over the very best; for it is a fact that the greatest variety of information is generally gathered in a very small compass. I have noticed that people are never so astonished as when some fact of natural history is unexpectedly pointed out to them, where it must have been for a long time under their very eyes. There are people who have never seen a humble bee drill a hole in the nectary of a snap-dragon, and yet have whole gardens full of flowers. At least, do not go out of your own locality much for some time.

More important than the education in facts is the education in feeling and sensibility, above all in the art of seeing, that Jefferies provides. We do not go to him for information (though he provides plenty of that, in such easily digestible form that, as the Edinburgh Review remarked of *Hodge,* 'you feel that you have learned a great deal, while seldom conscious that you were being instructed'[29]) so much as for a finer presentment of the things described. After reading Jefferies we can never look at nature in the same way again; we see it through his eyes, with perceptions cleansed, as if we were looking at the world for the first time, its freshness and beauty miraculously restored.

In *Nature Near London* there is much evidence of an increasing tenderness in Jefferies' attitude to nature. He is no longer the sportsman naturalist out with his rod or gun but the observer pure and simple, more concerned to preserve life than to take it. It was typical of the new attitude that he should watch a trout for days, weeks, months, four seasons in all, and go to such lengths to prevent its presence being detected by the anglers who came to fish the pond near the bridge. The younger Jefferies, the erstwhile amateur poacher, would probably have found a way quietly to withdraw the fish from the stream. The more mature, thoughtful, and contemplative man reasoned: 'But, then, what would be the pleasure of securing him, the fleeting pleasure of an hour, compared to the delight of seeing him almost day by day?' (66)

The brook looked ‘colder, darker, less pleasant’ when the fish was gone. In ‘The River’ he makes a passionate plea for the preservation of the Thames otter against the savage persecution to which it was subject. He is unsparing in his denunciation of the professional bird-catchers, yet thinks it twaddle to fine a boy for taking an egg.

Throughout the book Jefferies shows an increased awareness of what we nowadays call green issues. He complains bitterly about the wiring of oak and elm trees for posts and underlines the permanent damage thus caused to the trees (49). He suspects that sewers and leaking gas mains harm tree roots (50). Did he sound an early warning about Dutch Elm disease? In ‘Nutty Autumn’ he says: ‘There is something wrong with elm trees… Here and there a branch appeared as if it had been touched with red-hot iron and burnt up, all the leaves withered and browned on the boughs.’ (145) From the fact that the leaves did not shrivel up, he deduced that some grub or insect was responsible and that it attacked the bough itself. He made enquiries and established that it was not a local occurrence, elms and groups of elms a hundred miles away had been similarly affected. In ‘Trees About Town’ he recommends his readers make a table for the birds in winter and suggests a method of keeping it safe from cats. In ‘Heathlands’ he complains of the monotony of fir plantations and notes that nothing will grow under the trees, whose fallen needles, preserved by the resin, do not decay and enrich the earth, ‘so that, unless fir-tree timber is very valuable, and I never heard that it was, I would rather plant a waste with any other tree or brushwood.’. (122) In ‘Nightingale Road’ he is saddened and angered by the appearance of the droves of cattle passing along the Ewell Road. ‘Staring eyes, heads continually turned from side to side, starting at everything, sometimes bare places on the shoulders, all tell the same tale of blows and brutal treatment.’ (52) He contrasts the drovers’ brutality with the tender care shown by the shepherds. He notices a cloud of polluted air carried out by the wind over the fields from London one bright July day. ‘When it went over me there was a perceptible coolness and a faint smell of damp smoke, and immediately the road, which had been white under the sunshine, took a dim, yellowish hue.’ (51) His sensitive organisation registered, too, the less tangible effect of living in proximity to London, resulting in what we would perhaps call stress and he termed ‘a mental, a nerve-restlessness’ that prevented him experiencing the deep spiritual peace he had known on the Wiltshire downs. His ‘soul’ or ‘sun life’ was not suspended at Surbiton. He had his favourite ‘thinking places’, as he called them, havens from the stress of modern life. An aspen by the Hogsmill brook became one such site of almost daily pilgrimage, as he recalls in the autobiography. He was coming to see nature not only as a medicine for the body but as a balm for the restless, unquiet mind. There is now a more or less conscious resort to nature for inner peace as well as sensuous enjoyment. In Kew Gardens, which he call ‘a great green book, whose broad pages are illuminated with flowers’ (185), lying open at the feet of Londoners, he found some of the inner stillness his heart craved:

> There is a sense of repose in the mere aspect of large trees in groups and masses of quiet foliage. Their breadth of form steadies the roving eye; the rounded slopes, the wide

sweeping outline of these hills of green boughs, induce an inclination, like them, to rest. To recline upon the grass and with half-closed eyes gaze upon them is enough.

The delicious silence is not the silence of night, of lifelessness; it is the lack of jarring, mechanical noise; it is not silence but the sound of leaf and grass gently stroked by the soft and tender touch of the summer air. It is the sound of happy finches, of the slow buzz of humble-bees, of the occasional splash of a fish, or the call of a moorhen. Invisible in the brilliant beams above, vast legions of insects crowd the sky, but the product of their restless motion is a slumberous hum.

These sounds are the real silence; just as a tiny ripple of the water and the swinging of the shadows as the boughs stoop are the real stillness. If they were absent, if it was the soundlessness and stillness of stone, the mind would crave for something. But these fill and content it. Thus reclining, the storm and stress of life dissolve — there is no thought, no care, no desire. Somewhat of the Nirvana of the earth beneath — the earth which for ever produces and receives back again and yet is for ever at rest — enters into and soothes the heart. (193-^0

Nature Near London, like *Red Deer,* shows how smoothly and swiftly Jefferies could adapt to a new environment. By the time he came to write the *Standard* articles he had been living in Tolworth for at least three years and knew the area intimately through his habit of taking regular daily walks. Even so the North Surrey landscape was not in his veins as the North Wiltshire had been. He probably found it rather tame; certainly he missed the downs. 'Hills that purify those who walk on them there were not,' he recalled in his autobiography (*SH*, 62). The very frequency of his references to Wiltshire suggest a degree of nostalgia for his native county. In Surbiton he seems to have known none of the local farmers or labourers. He appears even more of the solitary than in Wiltshire and this may have been why the focus is more exclusively upon nature. He is very much the spectator, notebook in hand, meticulously observing and chronicling the life of the fields and hedgerows on his walks. Yet his attitude is never spectatorial. He enters fully into the life of all he sees, as in this description of a rowing-boat on the Thames:

The boat whose varnished sides but now slipped so gently that the cutwater did not even raise a wavelet, and every black rivet head was visible as a line of dots, begins to forge ahead. The oars are dipped farther back, and as the blade feels the water holding it in the hollow, the lissom wood bends to its work. Before the cutwater a wave rises, and, repulsed, rushes outwards. At each stroke, as the weight swings towards the prow, there is just the least faint depression at its stem as the boat travels. Whirlpool after whirlpool glides from the oars, revolving to the rear with a threefold motion, round and round, backwards and outwards. The crew impart their own life to their boat; the animate and inanimate become as one, the boat is no longer wooden but alive. (130)

So Jefferies imparts his own life to the boat through his prose.

Nature Near London is a transitional work between the exuberant ease of the early country books and the mystical consciousness of *The Story of My Heart.* A change has come over the author of *The Gamekeeper at Home.* Under the influence of his new environment he has evolved. His eye has become more concentrated, microscopic, subtle, intense. He is more attentive to detail and it is perhaps not altogether accidental that the opening words of the first essay are 'the tiny white petals'. Thomas thinks 'the increasing attention to small things may have come the more rapidly for his inability to walk as far as he used to do'. (*RJ*, 138) There have been

losses as well as gains. Some of the genial, gamey, outdoor spirit of the *Poacher* and its companion volumes has gone, as Thomas observed. His commentary on the change in matter and style evident in the *Nature Near London* papers, which he attributed in part to ill-health, cannot be bettered and must be quoted in full:

> When these books [the early country books] had been written his good health was at an end, and when, in *Nature Near London*, he came to describe scenes which he had not known as a young, man, there was a new subtlety in the observation, at once a more microscopic and a more sensuous eye, more tenderness, a greater love of making pictures and of dwelling upon colours and forms. There was no more of the rude rustic content to be out rabbitting and fishing. The tall countryman who knew and loved all weathers as they came was bending, and spring was now intensely spring to his reawakened, senses. The seasons, night and day, heat and cold, sun and rain and snow, became more sharply differentiated in his mind, and came to him with many fresh cries of joyous or pathetic appeal. In the early books the country lies before us very much as it would have appeared to James Luckett or old John Jefferies. They would have recognised everything in them, if they had had the luck to read them; the sport, the poaching, the curious notes on wild things, the old customs and pieces of gossip — these stand out clear and unquestionable as in an old woodcut. It was a priceless gift, smelling of youth and the days before the steam plough. But how different these later essays! Pain, anxiety, fatigue, had put a sharp edge on life — a keen edge, easily worn out. He was still glad to be with a shepherd to hear about the sport, but it was a characteristic of the new period that he should watch a trout for days and years, and be careful lest any one should rob the pool of it; that he should love the old wooden plough with no machine-made lines, and discover the 'bloom' in the summer atmosphere; and confess that he often went to London with no object, and, arriving there, wandered wherever the throng might carry him. In these later essays there is often much observation that may be read for its own sake. But something was creeping into the style, staining it with more delicate dyes. The bloom in the atmosphere, the hues on an old barn roof, were in part his own life blood. In the earlier work we think only of the author where he is explicitly autobiographical, though we may exercise our fancy about him in an irrelevant way. Many had seen nature just so, though he was alone in so writing of it. In the later he was more and more a singular man, a discoverer of colours, of moods, of arrangements. This was the landscape of sensuous, troubled men; here were most rare, most delicate, most fleeting things. The result was at once portraiture and landscape. (*RJ*, 292-293)

Perhaps inevitably, given the prodigious outpouring of the previous three years, *Nature Near London* shows signs of fatigue. There is some lack, unusual in Jefferies, of what W.B. Yeats called 'the springing foot'. Until the three Sussex essays at the end, there is little of what Mary Ogilvie, one of the characters in Henry Williamson's novel *The Pathway,* called 'the real Jefferies... the green corn spirit'.[30] More than most writers Jefferies rises and falls with his subject and in spite of (or perhaps because of) his many protestations of delight at the abundance of bird life in North Surrey one senses that he found the landscape rather flat and domesticated after Wiltshire. The concentration on avian life is in itself perhaps significant, indicative that, like W.H. Hudson in his shabby Bayswater lodging-house, Jefferies in Surbiton felt something of a caged bird. Certainly there is an almost palpable sense of release in the Sussex essays, a sense of joy and exaltation and homecoming as Jefferies climbs Ditchling Beacon and finds himself alone with the north wind on the summit:

> This is the last of the plain. Now every step exposes the climber to the force of the unchecked wind. The harebells swing before it, the bennets whistle, but the sward,

> springs to the foot, and the heart grows lighter as the height increases. The ancient hill is alone with the wind. (217)

> Down in the hollow the breeze does not come, and the bennets do not whistle, yet gazing upwards at the vapour in the sky I fancy I can hear the mass, as it were, of the wind going over. Standing presently at the edge of the steep descent looking into the Weald, it seems as if the mighty blast rising from that vast plain and glancing up the slope like an arrow from a tree could lift me up and bear me as it bears a hawk with outspread wings. (218)

> The ears are filled with a continuous sense of something rushing past; the shoulders go back square; an iron-like feeling enters into the sinews. The air goes through my coat as if it were gauze, and strokes the skin like a brush.
>
> The tide of the wind, like the tide of the sea, swirls about, and its cold push at the first causes a lifting feeling in the chest — a gulp and pant — as if it were too keen and strong to be borne. Then the blood meets it, and every fibre and nerve is filled with new vigour. I cannot drink enough of it. This is the north wind. (213)

But in some of the earlier essays there is rather a lot of cataloguing, and the writing is sometimes a trifle pedestrian, lacklustre, uninspired. W.J. Keith neatly puts his finger on what is lacking:

> The essays are expert, but for the most part less warm than his earlier work. One detects more of a reporter finding copy and less of a countryman speaking about what he knows and loves. They are at their best, I think, when — as in 'A London Trout' — a situation presents itself in which the writer can get emotionally involved in his material. [31]

Brian Taylor's book on Jefferies is unfortunately marred by its extensive plagiarism of W.J. Keith's critical study, but it does contain some original and valid points. Taylor observes that in the essay 'To Brighton' Jefferies' gaze 'travels upward, as it were, as he approaches the downs and the sea' in contrast to the downward direction of his gaze in the North Surrey essays, where Jefferies tends to focus on some detail in the foreground, like the colony of ants in 'Heathlands'. Taylor says 'it is as if he were afraid to lift his head and gaze at the skyline' and explains this reluctance by pointing out that whereas in Wiltshire the skyline would have revealed Liddington Hill and 'the broad back of the downs', in Surbiton 'the all-encompassing gaze would reveal the smoky haze of London encroaching over the horizon.' Taylor concedes there is much detailed observation in the earlier books but notes that 'in those, there is the sense of astonishing detail observed when casting the eyes down from the wider view'. .In other words, there Jefferies' vision was bifocal whereas in *Nature Near London* it has become more microscopic. Taylor states that he intends none of this as criticism of the essays in *Nature Near London* but that it does indicate a shift in Jefferies' viewpoint in the period leading up to the writing of *The Story of My Heart.* 'It is as if when sight is becoming vision, the outward, all-encompassing gaze first has to be directed downward before it can be turned inward.'[32]

This is very perceptive but Taylor's thesis needs some qualification. From Tolworth Jefferies could see the Epsom and Banstead Downs to the south, and many passages show Jefferies' delighted response to effects of sky and atmosphere. As Thomas remarks, 'he was always a careful watcher of the skies, and the Thames valley and the neighbourhood of London gave his eyes a fuller harvest than ever'. (*RJ,* 138) The second part of 'Magpie Fields'

is devoted to the London sky and there is a striking passage on the dramatic, even lurid, sunset skies Jefferies witnessed from Westminster Bridge:

> Vast rugged columns of vapour rise up behind and over the towers of the House, hanging with threatening aspect; westward the sky is nearly clear, with some relic of the sunset glow: the river itself, black or illuminated with the electric light, imparting a silvery blue tint, crossed again with the red lamps of the steamers. The aurora of dark vapour, streamers extending from the thicker masses, slowly moves and yet does not go away; it is just such a sky as a painter might give to some tremendous historical event, a sky big with presage, gloom, tragedy. (181-2)

Much in *Nature Near London* indicates that Jefferies had not entirely lost sight of the larger picture, that very often his eye (and spirit) were directed upward and outward. But Taylor's point is in the main sound. The vision has become more narrowly focussed and at times the amount of detail becomes wearisome. And Taylor is surely right to relate this narrowing of focus to the North Surrey landscape which does not offer the same liberating sense of space and distance as do the Marlborough and Lambourn Downs, of which Edward Thomas wrote: 'There is something oceanic in their magnitude, their ease, their solitude… They are never abrupt, but flowing on and on, make a type of infinity.' (*RJ*, 13)

If more narrowly focussed, the eye is also more self-consciously artistic, a point emphasised by Thomas who writes that 'in these papers he is no longer the sportsman, and not obviously the countryman. He is the man of sensitive eyes and ears, the artist in a narrow sense'; that 'some papers such as 'Nutty Autumn', 'Wheatfields' and 'A Barn', have a unity of feeling and colour, and though they are not meant to compete with painting, they have the effect of a rich, humanised landscape'; that 'where he catalogues it is with an eye more bent upon the finest detail of form and colour than before'; that 'some of his minute descriptions read like instructions to an artist, and they prove a busy eye and nothing more'; that in 'A Barn' he 'has made a real picture, where there is no detail impeding the whole', while 'Nutty Autumn' has 'some learned and delightful colour notes. Artists may treasure them; they may teach others how to see; but notes they remain, in spite of the conclusion'. In general he opines that the Jefferies of *Nature Near London* (by contrast with the author of the early country books) had 'a greater love of making pictures and of dwelling upon colours and form'. (*RJ*, 138-40)

There are many references to painting in *Nature Near London.* In 'A Brook' Jefferies likens his method of seeing through water to looking at a paintings and advises: 'Shift, too, your position according to the fall of the light, just as in looking at a painting. From one point of view the canvas shows little but the presence of paint and blurred colour, from another at the side the picture stands out.' (59) *Mutatis mutandis* this technique is particularly applicable to impressionist painting, of which Jefferies seems unaware. For when he remarks in 'Magpie Fields' that 'the London atmosphere is, I should fancy, quite as well adapted to the artist's uses as the changeless glare of the continent. The smoke itself is not without its interest' (181) he gives no sign of realising that this discovery had already been made by the impressionist painters, some of whom, like Monet and Pissarro, had come to

London in 1871 to escape the Franco-Prussian war, whose effects Jefferies himself had witnessed during his Brussels trip the previous year, the sight of the wounded men returning from Sedan remaining indelibly engraved in his memory. (*OA*, 212-3). During his 1871 visit Monet painted the first of his many views of London and the Thames, a subject to which he returned during subsequent visits around the turn of the century. Some of his views of the Thames bridges and the Houses of Parliament, with red suns and fog, are uncannily like Jefferies' description of the London sky in 'Magpie Fields', although he could not have seen the paintings. In them Monet was consciously setting out to emulate, even surpass, Turner, whose 'Rain, Steam, and Speed' Jefferies called 'a most wonderful picture'. (*FH*, 143). Monet's views of the Thames may also have been partially inspired by Whistler's 'Nocturnes', painted during the mid-1870s, which Jefferies may have seen; he mentions Whistler in 'A Wet Night in London'. (*OA*, 230)

Two further links with the impressionists may be briefly noted. Alfred Sisley, subject of a major exhibition at the Royal Academy this summer, came to England in the summer of 1874 and stayed near Hampton Court, which had become a popular leisure resort for Londoners, the palace and its grounds having been opened to the public shortly after Queen Victoria's accession, and the river offering facilities for swimming and boating, as we can see from Jefferies' essays 'The River' and 'The Modern Thames'. Sisley painted a series of some 16 views of the river between Hampton Court Bridge and Molesey Weir,[33] scenes which Jefferies would instantly have recognised from his walks along the Thames tow-path. In 'The Modern Thames' Jefferies recounts a rowing expedition which brought him to the foot of Molesey Weir, subject of one of Sisley's most powerful compositions, and which was ruined for Jefferies by his reading a newspaper story about a man drowned at a weir in a boating accident. (*OA*, 117) Then, in April 1883, the same month and year in which *Nature Near London* was published, a major impressionist exhibition organised by the dealer Durand-Ruel opened at Dowdeswell's galleries in New Bond Street. The exhibition attracted considerable publicity, much of it hostile, and if he did not see the exhibition itself Jefferies could well have seen the reviews, some of which appeared in publications to which he contributed. The usual objection was raised: the paintings were not finished. The *Morning Post* found the exhibition's mirth-making capacity its only recommendation, and the *Pall Mall Gazette* was similarly dismissive. But the *Standard,* perhaps surprisingly for such a conservative newspaper, welcomed the exhibition as setting out 'the aims and achievements of a modern school of undoubted importance' and declared that the impressionists 'are not all that narrow and ill-informed [as] partisan advocacy has represented them to be... With all their deficiencies, they are individual, brilliant, engaging. They are a force to be reckoned with. And one of the greatest causes of their force is that it is the life of their own day that has inspired their art.'[34] Which is precisely what Jefferies called for in modern art, when he wrote in 'Walks in the Wheatfields':

> If a man choose his hour rightly, the steam-plough under certain atmospheric conditions would give him as good a subject as a Great Western train. He who has got the sense of beauty in his eye can find it in things as they really are, and needs no stagey time of

artificial pastorals to furnish him with a sham nature. Idealise to the full, but idealise the real, else the picture is a sham. (*FH*, 143)

Jefferies was not a phrase-maker but some of his imagery is memorable. The gateways which show the thickness of a hedge, 'as an embrasure shows the thickness of a wall' (3); the wind whistling through the poplar' thin branches 'as in the rigging of a ship' (68); the Irish labourer who 'walks upright as if drilled, with a quick easy gait and springy step, quite distinct from the Saxon stump' (84); the stalk of the pea which goes through the leaf 'as a painter-' thrusts his thumb through his palette' (96). Among the highlights of the collection I would place the depiction of the stillness and silence of the woods in August in 'Woodlands', the vacancy heightened by contrast with the teeming abundance of life celebrated in the Lawrentian *Rainbow*-like passage ('Joy in life; joy in life…') earlier in the essay and suggested in subtle and rather ghostly fashion by the attention paid to the marks of life no longer there, the dandelion stalks dropped by the wayside by a child, the wisps of hay clinging to the lower boughs of an oak, the deep ruts left in the lane by the timber carriages. The sense of silence and vacancy beautifully prepare us for the dreamlike intensity of the final scene, where Jefferies comes out from the wood into a field where he watches a waggon being loaded with sheaves of corn, the waggon shimmering like a mirage in the flood of brilliant light. The scene closes the opening essay of the collection. There is a parallel scene, similarly hovering between dream and reality, in the last essay, 'The Breeze on Beachy Head', where from a hill top Jefferies looks out over the sea in the Channel and finds that with the merging of sky and sea in the heat the ships have taken on an unreality of appearance:

… the still ships appear suspended in space. They are as much held from above as upborne from beneath.

They are motionless, midway in space — whether it is sea or air is not to be known. They neither float nor fly, they are suspended. There is no force in the flat sail, the mast is lifeless, the hull without impetus. For hours they linger, changeless as the constellations, still, silent, motionless, phantom vessels on a void sea. (238)

Heat is powerfully evoked in 'Wheatfields', an essay on 'the wheat is beautiful but human life is labour' theme, whose humanity and visionary quality ally Jefferies with Van Gogh. This essay looks forward to 'One of the New Voters' and 'Walks in the Wheatfields', two of his later masterpieces. 'Nutty Autumn' is notable for the Keatsian sensuousness of its evocation of the tawny autumn sunshine. Water is another motif running through the book, from the Hogsmill to the Thames to the sea at the end, representing the current of Jefferies' mysticism, which Thomas compared to 'a deep pool that slowly fills with an element so clear that it is unnoticed until it overflows'. (*RJ*, 293) It was while living at Surbiton that Jefferies experienced 'a sense of moral drought', as if he had been absent, for many years from the sources of life and hope. Weary for 'the pure, fresh springs of thought', 'some instinctive feeling uncontrollable' drove him to the sea at Worthing, a pilgrimage later recorded in his autobiography. 'So deep was the inhalation of this life that day, that it seemed to remain in me for years.' (*SH*, 79) It was by the sea that he had first resolved to write down a record of his inner

life from the time when, at the age of seventeen, 'an inner and esoteric meaning' had begun to come to him 'from all the visible universe' and he was filled with 'indefinable aspirations' (*SH*, 125). It was again by the sea at Pevensey, in 1880, 'under happy circumstances', that he made the first notes for the book, which became *The Story of My Heart* (*SH,* 126). In December 1881 Jefferies fell ill with a fistula, tubercular in origin. Over the next 12 months he endured the painful series of operations used to control the disease. He continued to write, although his output was drastically reduced. In July the following year he moved to West Brighton to convalesce. But, as Thomas remarks, 'his ill health is nothing to record, except as something triumphed over by the spirit of life' (*RJ*, 295) and 'the addition of the sea to the downs did for him all that could be done without restoring him to youth and Wiltshire'. (*LPE*, 136) 'The Breeze on Beachy Head', like *The Amateur Poacher,* ends with a sunset picture:

> The sun sinks behind the summit of the Downs, and slender streaks of purple are drawn along above them. A shadow comes forth from the cliff; a duskiness dwells on the water; something tempts the eye upwards, and near the zenith is a star, (242)

In Thomas's words, 'he sniffs immortal airs on the open road ahead' (*RJ*, 161).

Jefferies is not well served by excerpts, his effects are accumulative, but I should like to read these few passages to illustrate the breadth and diversity of his response to nature. simple happiness of this, for example:

> One afternoon there rose up a flock of rooks out of a large oak tree standing separate in the midst of an arable field which was then at last being ploughed. This oak is a favourite with the rooks of the neighbourhood, and they have been noticed to visit it more frequently than others. Up they went, perhaps a hundred of them, rooks and jackdaws together cawing and soaring round and round until they reached a great height. At that level, as if they had attained their ball-room, they swept round and round on outstretched wings, describing circles and ovals in the air. Caw-caw; jack-juck-juck! Thus dancing in slow measure, they enjoyed the sunshine, full from their feast of acorns. (170)

In more visionary mode, this description of a huge flock of lapwings — Jefferies estimated that they numbered 2000 — which took up residence in a broad ploughed field in the winter of 1881/2:

> It is the habit of green plovers to all move at once, to rise from the ground simultaneously, to turn in the air, or to descend — and all so regular that their very wings seem to flap together. The effect of such a vast body of white-breasted birds uprising as one from the dark ploughed earth was very remarkable.
>
> When they passed overhead the air sang like the midsummer hum with the shrill noise of beating wings. When they wheeled a light shot down reflected from their white breasts, so that people involuntarily looked up to see what it could be. The sun shone on them, so that at a distance the flock resembled a cloud brilliantly illuminated. In an instant they turned and the cloud was darkened. (157-8)

This picture of night in the suburbs:

> When a few minutes on the rail has carried you outside the hub as it were of London, among the quiet tree-skirted villas, the night reigns as completely as in the solitudes of the country. Perhaps even more so, for the solitude is somehow more apparent. The last

> theatre-goer has disappeared inside his hall door, the last dull roll of the brougham, with its happy laughing load, has died away — there is not so much as a single footfall. The cropped holly hedges, the leafless birches, the limes and acacias are still and distinct in the moonlight. A few steps further out on the highway the copse or plantation sloops in utter silence.
>
> But the tall elms are the most striking; the length of the branches and their height above brings them across the light, so that they stand out even more shapely than when in leaf. The blue sky (not, of course, the blue of day), the white moonlight, the bright stars — larger at midnight and brilliant, in despite of the moon, which cannot overpower them in winter as she does in summer evenings — all are as beautiful as on the distant hills of old. By night, at last, even here, in the still silence, Heaven has her own way. (183)

This linking of flower and bird with star:

> Our own trees and shrubs literally keep pace with the stars which shine in our northern skies. An astronomical floral almanack might almost be constructed, showing how, as the constellations marched on by night, the buds and leaves and flowers appeared by day.
>
> The lower that Sirius sinks in the western sky after ruling the winter heavens, and the higher that red Arcturus rises, so the buds thicken, open, and bloom. When the Pleiades begin to rise in the early evening, the leaves are turning colour, and the seed vessels of the flowers take the place of the petals. The coincidence of floral and bird life, and of these with the movements of the heavens, impart a sense of breadth to their observation.
>
> It is not only the violet or the anemone, there are the birds coming from immense distances to enjoy the summer with us; there are the stars appearing in succession, so that the most distant of objects seems brought into connection with the nearest, and the world is made one. The sharp distinction, the line artificially drawn between things, quite disappears when they are thus associated. (204)

This haunting, disembodied landscape for its visionary colour and suggestiveness and the Keatsian note at the end:

> Returning presently to the gateway just outside the wood… a waggon is now passing among the corn and is being laden with the sheaves. But afar off, across the broad field and under the wood, it seems somehow only a part of the silence and the solitude. The men with it move about the stubble, calmly toiling; the horses, having drawn it a little way, become motionless, reposing as they stand, every line of their large limbs expressing delight in physical ease and idleness.
>
> Perhaps the heat has made the men silent, for scarcely a word is spoken; if it were, in the stillness it must be heard, though they are at some distance. The wheels, well greased for the heavy harvest work, do not creak. Save an occasional monosyllable, as the horses are ordered on, or to stop, and a faint rustling of straw, there is no sound. It may be the flood of brilliant light, or the mirage of the heat, but in some way the waggon and its rising load, the men and the horses, have an unreality of appearance.
>
> The yellow wheat and stubble, the dull yellow of the waggon, toned down by years of weather, the green wood near at hand, darkening in the distance and slowly changing to blue, the cloudless sky, the heat-suffused atmosphere, in which things seem to float rather than to grow or stand, the shadowless field, all are there, and yet are not there, but far away and vision-like. The waggon, at last laden, travels away, and seems rather to disappear of itself than to be hidden by the trees. It is an effort to awake and move from the spot. (13)

This portrait of a carter, whom Edward Thomas perhaps had half in mind when he wrote that ‘I warrant every man who was ever any good had a little apple-faced man or woman like this somewhere not very far back in his

pedigree' (TC, 9), with the same idea as Hardy's 'In Time of "The Breaking of Nations"' in its conclusion:

> He is short and thickly set, a man of some fifty years, but hard and firm of make. His face is broad and red, his shiny fat cheeks almost as prominent as his stumpy nose, likewise red and shiny. A fringe of reddish whiskers surrounds his chin like a cropped hedge. The eyes are small and set deeply, a habit of half-closing the lids when walking in the teeth of the wind and rain has caused them to appear still smaller. The wrinkles at the corners and the bushy eyebrows are more visible and pronounced than the eyes themselves, which are mere bright grey points twinkling with complacent good humour.
>
> These red cheeks want but the least motion to break into a smile: the action of opening the lips to speak is sufficient to give that expression. The fur cap he wears allows the round shape of his head to be seen, and the thick neck which is the colour of a brick. Ho trudges deliberately round the straw rick; there is something in the style of the man which exactly corresponds to the barn, and the straw, and the stone staddles, and the waggons. Could we but look back three hundred years, just such a man would be seen in the midst of the same surroundings, deliberately trudging round the straw ricks of Elizabethan days, cairn and complacent though the Armada be at hand. There are the ricks just the same, there is the barn, and the horses are in good case; the wheat is coming on well. Armies may march, but these are the same. (85)

And lastly this description of the blackbird's song, not only because it was Jefferies' favourite (somewhere he says, 'I own I love the blackbird the best') but because the qualities of the song in which he delights are those that characterise his own writing: the warmth and humanity, the improvisation and lack of set order, the fragmentary yet flowing nature of the song, the repetitions and phrases 'recurring like a burden' (*RJ*, 296), the sensitivity to the beauty of the summer day, the rich exuberance and generosity of heart. It was Edward Thomas who wrote of Jefferies that 'given an entirely suitable subject, he wrote with a natural fineness and richness and a carelessness, too, like the blackbird's singing'. (*RJ*, 164)

> The blackbird's whistle is very human, like some one playing the flute; an uncertain player now drawing forth a bar of a beautiful melody and then losing it again. He does not know what quiver or what turn his note will take before it ends; the note leads him and completes itself. His music strives to express his keen appreciation of the loveliness of the days, the golden glory of the meadow, the light, and the luxurious shadows.
>
> Such thoughts can only be expressed in fragments, like a sculptor's chips thrown off as the inspiration seizes him, not mechanically sawn to a set line. NOW and again the blackbird feels the beauty of the time, the large white daisy stars, the grass with yellow-dusted tips, the air which comes so softly unperceived by any precedent rustle of the hedge. He feels the beauty of the time, and he must say it. His notes come like wild flowers not sown in order. (162)

NOTES

All references to *Nature Near London* consist of simple page numbers inside brackets and are quoted from the first edition (Chatto & Windus, 1883). Otherwise, I have followed W.J. Keith's example and used abbreviations in the text when referring both to Jefferies' works and Edward Thomas's.

The abbreviations follow W.J. Keith's key, i.e.:

AF = Amaryllis at the Fair, Quartet Books, 1980;

AP = The Amateur Poacher, World's Classics edition (with *The Gamekeeper at Home*), OUP, 1948;

B = *Bevis*, Readers' Library edition, Duckworth, 1910;
FF = *Field and Farm,* Phoenix House, 1957;
FH = *Field and Hedgerow,* Longmans, 1889;
HV = *The Hills and the Vale,* Duckworth, 1909;
LF = *The Life of the Fields,* Chatto & Windus, 1906;
N = *The Nature Diaries and Note-Books of Richard Jefferies,* edited by Samuel J. Looker, Grey Walls Press, 1948;
OA = *The Open Air,* Chatto & Windus, 1904;
OHC = *The Old House at Coate,* Lutterworth, 1948;
SH = *The Story of My Heart,* Constable, 1947;
SS = *The Scarlet Shawl,* Tinsley, 1874.

For Edward Thomas references:
RJ = *Richard Jefferies: His Life and Work,* Faber, 1978;
CET = *The Childhood of Edward Thomas,* Faber, 1983;
LPE = *A Literary Pilgrim in England,* Cape, 1928;
TC = *The Country,* Batsford, 1913.

1 Robert Gittings, *Young Thomas Hardy* (Heinemann, 1975), p.107.
2 Quoted in John Pearson, Introduction to *Landscape & Labour* (Moonraker Press, 1979), p.9.
3 Samuel J. Looker (ed.), *Beauty is Immortal* (Worthing: Aldridge Brothers, 1948), p.51.
4 See letter to George Bentley in Samuel J. Looker (ed.), *Field and Farm* (Phoenix House, 1957), p.41: 'I am only too proud to say I am a son of the soil and to add that my family have been farmers and landowners for nearly 300 years.'
5 Quoted in Oswald Crawfurd, 'Richard Jefferies: Field-Naturalist and Litterateur,' *The Idler,* October 1898, No. III, Vol. XIV, p.295.
6 W.J. Keith, Notes on *The Gamekeeper at Home* (Richard Jefferies Society, 1977), p.1.
7 Charles G. Freeman, 'Richard Jefferies at Surbiton, *The Surbiton Times,* June 18, 1896. The only known copies are held at Kingston Local History Room, North Kingston Centre (Room 46), Richmond Road, Kingston upon Thames, Surrey, and a cutting at the Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society Library, The Museum, Devizes, Wiltshire.
8 For the 19th-century history of Surbiton, see June Sampson, *All Change: Kingston, Surbiton and New Maiden in the 19th Century* (St Luke's Church, Kingston upon Thanes, 1985) and *Kingston and Surbiton Old and New, A Pictorial History* (Marine Day Publishers, 1992).
9 Samuel J. Looker (ed.), *Richard Jefferies; A Tribute by Various Writers* (Worthing: Aldridge Brothers, 1946), p.114.
10 Cyril F. Wright, 'Richard Jefferies in Surrey,' text of talk given to the Richard Jefferies Society on December 5, 1977, p.1.
11 Wright, *op. cit.*, p.2.
12 Joseph Hatton, *Journalistic .London* (Sampson Low, 1882), p.??
13 ' There is a mystery about the genesis of 'A London Trout', which forms a sequel to 'A Brook' but was not apparently included among the original *Standard* articles. In *The Old House at Coate* Samuel J. Looker published under Jefferies' own title of The Last of a London Trout' a ms which appears to have been a first draft of 'A London Trout'. Looker (*OHC,* 209) says it was written in Jefferies' holograph on 28 pages of ms numbered 32-61; the first 31 pages were missing. He reasonably surmised that the missing pages consisted of 'A Brook'. However, 'A Brook' was published in the *Standard* on 30 September 1880, while both 'The Last of a London Trout' and 'A London Trout' must have been written in or after May 1881 because the damming of the brook and the appearance of the four men armed with a spear are mentioned in notebook entries for that month (*N,* 111).

Chronology poses another problem. In ‘A Brook’ it appears Jefferies has been watching the trout for a single summer; in ‘A London Trout’ he says he watched it for four summers in all. Given the fact that he last saw the fish in May 1881, this means he must have first seen it in 1878, although the earliest reference I could find to it in the notebooks was under an entry for 27 June, 1879 (*N*, 59).

The following is offered as a highly tentative solution to the enigma. After the disappearance and presumed slaughter of the trout in May 1881, Jefferies decided to write a sequel to ‘A Brook’ (the need to add to the original *Standard* articles to make up a volume of sufficient length for publication may have been another factor in the decision). The sequel was written sometime between May 1881 and October 1882 (when the collected articles were submitted to a publisher). In the process Jefferies became dissatisfied with the original ending to ‘A Brook’. So he rewrote the final two paragraphs, deleting the reference to the second trout, which he may have felt unnecessarily complicated the story, and wrote the first draft of the sequel in the form published by Looker as ‘The Last of a London Trout’. This he then revised and the revised version became ‘A London Trout’ as published in *Nature Near London.*
However, the disappearance of the second trout, of which we hear no more, remains puzzling — indeed distinctly fishy.

14 I am indebted to Phyllis Treitel and Hugoe Matthews for supplying the information on the publishing history of *Nature Near London.*

15 Simon Nowell-Smith, *The House of Cassell 1848-1958* (Cassell, 1958), pp.106-7.

16 W.J. Keith, Notes on *Nature Near London* (Richard Jefferies Society, 1982), p.2.

17 See obituary in Cyril Wright (ed.), *Richard Jefferies Society, Autumn Newsletter and Annual Report, 1991-1992,* p.22.

18 Keith, *op. cit.,* p.2.

19 Walter Besant, *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies* (Chatto & Windus, 1889), p.170.

20 Besant, *op. cit.,* p.170.

21 Freeman, *op. cit.*

22 H.K. Springett, ‘Richard Jefferies at Surbiton and His “Nature Near London”’ in Samuel J. Looker (ed.), *Richard Jefferies: A Tribute by Various Writers* (Worthing: Aldridge Brothers, 1946”), pp.113-128.

23 Wright, *op. cit.,* p.2

24 Richard Mabey, *The Unofficial Countryside* (Sphere Books, 1978), pp. 33-4.

25 Mabey, *op. cit.,* pp. 13-4.

26 W.E. Henley, *Views and Reviews* (David Nutt, 1890), p.l80.

27 Geoffrey Grigson, ‘My Impressions of Richard Jefferies,’ *Countrygoer* (Richard Jefferies Centenary Number), XII (Winter, 1948), p. 15.

28 Richard Jefferies, Preface to Gilbert White, *The Natural History of Selborne* (Walter Scott, 1837), p.xi.

29 ‘Landlords, Tenants, and Labourers’ (review of *Hodge and His Masters*), *Edinburgh Review,* CLII (July 1830), p.148.

30 Henry Williamson, *The Pathway* (Faber, 1933), p.49. Quoted in W.J. Keith, *The Rural Tradition* (University of Toronto Press, 1974), p.137.

31 W.J. Keith, Notes on *Nature Near London* (Richard Jefferies Society, 1982), p.1.

32 Brian Taylor, *Richard Jefferies* (Twayne Publishers, Boston, 1982). The whole section on *Nature Near London* (pp.137-143) is worth reading.

33 See Nicholas Reed, *Sisley and the Thames* (Lilburne Press, 1991).

34 Article in the *Standard,* April 25, 1883, quoted by John Rewald, *The History of Impressionism* (Seeker & Warburg, 1985), p. 484.