SUSSEX AND RICHARD JEFFERIES

By Andrew Rossabi, 1994

Sussex was the home of the Victorian nature writer Richard Jefferies for four of the last five years of his life. He spent two years at Hove and then a year at Eltham in Kent, after which he was at Rotherfield, Crowborough, and finally Goring-on-Sea, where he died in 1887. Sussex provided the setting for many of the essays in *The Life of the Fields* (1884), *The Open Air* (1885) and *Field and Hedgerow* (1889). In Sussex Jefferies also wrote the book which many critics regard as his masterpiece and for which he is still chiefly remembered today, the short volume of spiritual autobiography titled *The Story of My Heart* (1883).

Jefferies came to Sussex in 1882 at the age of 33, already famous for his books on natural history and the countryside *The Gamekeeper at Home*, *Wild Life in a Southern County*, *The Amateur Poacher*, *Hodge and His Masters* and *Round About a Great Estate*, which had established him as the foremost country writer of his day. Wrote his biographer, the poet Edward Thomas:

> No one English writer before had had such a wide knowledge of labourers, farmers, gamekeepers, poachers, of the fields, and woods, and waters... 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.

Descended from a long line of Wiltshire farmers and connected on his mother's side with the London printing trade, Jefferies was born in 1848 at Coate, a hamlet near Swindon in North Wilts, where he lived for most of his first 27 years. His father was a small debt-ridden dairy farmer who was eventually forced to sell up, ending his days as an odd-job gardener in Bath.

In 1866 Jefferies joined the staff of a local newspaper in Swindon, the *North Wilts Herald,* and he remained a professional journalist for the rest of his working life. He first came into prominence in 1872 as a result of a series of letters published in *The Times* on the Wiltshire labourer, at a time when farm workers in many parts of England were agitating for better pay and conditions under the leadership of Joseph Arch, founder of the first Agricultural Labourers Union.

The attention attracted by the letters, which forcefully argued the case of the farmers against the labourers, enabled Jefferies to place his articles on farming in national magazines like *Fraser's* and *New Quarterly*, and in 1877 he moved to Surbiton to be closer to his London editors while retaining a foothold in the country, increasingly the focus of his literary and spiritual aspirations.

After several years vainly spent trying to make a name as a novelist Jefferies finally hit on his true subject, for which the move to Surbiton acted as a catalyst. Drawing on his rich store of memories of the Wiltshire countryside he poured them forth in a stream of articles in the *Pall Mall Gazette* and *Standard*, later collecting and publishing them in volume form as *The Gamekeeper at Home* and its successors.

The five years Jefferies spent at Surbiton were his most successful and prolific but the remarkable outburst of creative activity took its inevitable

toll. His health had never been strong and in December 1881 Jefferies fell ill with a fistula which was later found to be tubercular in origin. During the following year he underwent a series of four operations. The pain was intense, 'like lightning through the brain'.

In July 1882 Jefferies moved with his wife Jessie and two small children Harold and Phyllis to West Brighton (now Hove) in the hope that the sea air would improve his health. The family lived at 'Savernake', 8 (now 87) Lorna Road, the house named after the forest at Marlborough which had been the subject of one of Jefferies' earliest essays in the *Graphic* in 1875. A Jewish family lived next door and, recalled Harold in later years, 'finding us friendly, they used to send in little gifts to father, such as passover bread, which we all enjoyed very much.' Harold also recalled many hours spent with his parents in the shelters along the Front 'just watching the surf on the beach', frequent visits to the Aquarium, long walks over the Downs at Rottingdean, and the large number of pipistrelle bats which appeared in Lorna Road on summer evenings.

Jefferies was no stranger to Brighton or Sussex. As a child he had visited Brighton, Worthing, Hastings, Eastbourne and Lewes with his aunt and uncle, the Harrilds. In 1870 he spent ten days in Hastings on his way to Brussels. After the fall of Napoleon III during the Franco-Prussian war, the Empress Eugénie had escaped to England with her son, the Prince Imperial, and they were staying at the Marine Hotel at the same time as Jefferies was at Green's. Jefferies composed some verses on the Prince's exile which he sent to the 14-year-old boy and was much gratified by his courteous reply. Jefferies drew on this Hastings holiday in his first novel *The Scarlet Shawl* (1874), a yellowback partly set in the adjoining resort of St Leonards. In 1879 the Jefferies took a five-week holiday in Brighton; the following year the family spent seven weeks at Eastbourne. During this holiday Jefferies visited Pevensey 'in happy circumstances' and it was by the castle that he made the first notes for *The Story of My Heart.* The last three essays in *Nature Near London* (1883) — 'To Brighton', "The Southdown Shepherd', and 'The Breeze on Beachy Head' — were inspired by these holidays on the south coast.

At Brighton Jefferies was again within easy reach of downland scenery like that of his native Wiltshire, with the addition of the sea, about which he could only dream on the hills near Coate. 'There is little indeed in the more immediate suburbs of London to gratify the sense of the beautiful,' he wrote in *The Story of My Heart*, looking back on his Surbiton days. 'Hills that purify those who walk on them there were not.' Now on the 'smooth express' to Brighton, he laid aside his newspaper or novel as a puff of air entered the open carriage window, 'disturbing the heated stillness of the summer day'. Silently the Downs had stolen into sight. 'There is always hope in the hills,' he wrote in 'To Brighton'. 'Hope dwells there, somewhere mayhap in the breeze, in the sward, or the pale cups of the harebells.'

The Brighton essays testify to Jefferies' sense of release. The sea air, the brilliant sunshine, 'whole armfuls of it', the sight and sound of the waters, the maritime light, clear and pure as that of the Mediterranean, the fishing-boats beached on the shingle, the curve of the bows 'pleasant to the eye, as any curve is that recalls those of woman', the screens of nets under repair,

the smells of fish, brine, pitch and seaweed, the happy excitement and bustle of the holiday crowds whose arrival at the station Jefferies used to go up specially to watch, the departing cabs 'overgrown with luggage like huge barnacles', all this was champagne to his senses, his enjoyment reflected in the sparkling quality of essays like 'Sunny Brighton' and 'The Bathing Season', which have an invigorating zest as if a part of him had been swept clean of the dust of London, the breeziness of a seascape by Monet or Boudin.

The body was recharged, the senses intoxicated. 'This,' he declared, 'is the land of health.' The sea, the air, the sun, wore 'the three potent medicines of nature... that by degrees strengthen not only the body but the unquiet mind.' ('The Breeze on Beach Head') Once again he could be 'alone with the north wind on the hills' with their distinctive flora and fauna, the blue milkwort and yellow birdsfoot trefoil flowers, the delicious scent of wild thyme, the bees 'laden with their golden harvest', the sound of the larks 'like a waterfall in the sky', the blue butterflies ('look long and lovingly at this blue butterfly's underwing, and a feeling will rise to your consciousness'), the faint 'sish-sish' of the wind through the bents and dry grass 'as of the sea heard in a dream':

> But the glory of these glorious Downs is the breeze. The air in the valleys immediately beneath them is pure and pleasant; but the least climb, even a hundred feet, puts you on a plane with the atmosphere itself, uninterrupted by so much as the tree-tops. It is air without admixture. If it comes from the south, the waves refine it; if inland, the wheat and flowers and grass distil it. (*op. cit.*)

Jefferies was soon familiar with much of the South Down range, visiting the Devil's Dyke, Ditchling Beacon, Wolstanbury Hill, Hurstpierpoint, the Duke of Norfolk's estate at Arundel, and Rottingdean.

If the downs were one source of renewal and inspiration, what lay beyond, the sea, its reflected light glowing in the sky over them, was another.

> There is an infinite possibility about the sea; it may do what it is not recorded to have done... It has a potency unfathomable. There is still something in it not quite grasped and understood — something still to be discovered — a mystery... What wonder could surprise us coming from the wonderful sea? (*op. cit.*)

Water played an important part in Jefferies' work. In his children's story *Bevis* (1883) the reservoir at Coate is transformed into a shining inland sea in the boy's imagination. Longfellow's 'The Secret the Sea' was one of Jefferies' favourite poems, the *Odyssey* another. His son Harold 'inherited a passion for the sea and ships from father', becoming a merchant seaman when he grew up. The sea is a common symbol of the unknown, the emotions, and the collective unconscious, and we may guess that its presence at Brighton helped to precipitate the writing of a book about which Jefferies told the publisher C.J. Longman on June 22, 1883, he had been meditating 17 years. This was his autobiography *The Story of My Heart*, an account of his spiritual progress from the time when as a youth of 18 'an inner and esoteric meaning began to come to me from all the visible universe'. The mystical communion with nature, which Jefferies had experienced since boyhood and intensified under the stress of illness, was,

in Thomas's words, 'as a deep pool that slowly fills with an element so clear that it is unnoticed until it overflows. It overflowed, and Jefferies wrote *The Story of My Heart* in a passion.'

The book's general aim was 'to free thought from every trammel... with the view of its entering upon another and larger series of ideas than those which have occupied the brain of man so many centuries.' Jefferies believed there was 'a whole world of ideas outside and beyond those which now exercise us'. Dissatisfied like many Victorians with the established religion of his age, Jefferies had turned to nature and the unknown in search of 'something higher than deity'. In language of great purity he described his rapturous communion with sun, sky, sea and down, his prayer for a fuller life of the soul and his vision of a world freed from want and needless toil. At the core of the book is a statement of Jefferies' faith in the soul's immortality and disbelief in the reality of time:

> Time has never existed, and never will; it is a purely artificial arrangement. It is eternity now, it always was eternity, and always will be. By no possible means could I get into time if I tried. I am in eternity now and must there remain. Haste not, be at rest, this Now is eternity.

The Story of My Heart was a failure on publication but is now recognised as a modern classic of English mysticism. Many writers have tried to describe the mystical experience which is notoriously difficult to express in words — 'clumsy indeed are all words the moment the wooden stage of commonplace life is left' — but few have conveyed it so clearly and vividly as Jefferies. The author's revelation becomes the reader's; his awareness and moral sympathies are widened; he feels an authentic frisson before the mystery and beauty of the world beyond the threshold of everyday consciousness. Jefferies' mysticism never again reached the heights of *The Story of My Heart* but it did not entirely die away and its light is diffused through the best of the later work.

Most of *The Story* was based on memories of Wiltshire, Surbiton and London, but passages like those recording the visit to Pevensey clearly relate to Sussex. In Chapter II Jefferies relates how he conceived and formulated what he calls the Lyra prayer in 'a deep hollow on the side of a great hill, a green concave opening to the sea' and this was probably Beachy Head, regularly visited during the holiday at Eastbourne in 1880. The passionate pilgrimage to the sea described in Chapter VI ('So deep was the inhalation of this life that day, that it seemed to remain in me for years') refers to an impulsive visit to Worthing made in 1876. The references to sea, shore, and downs in the closing pages reflect contemporary experience at or near Brighton.

In 'Richard Jefferies and Sussex', an article published in *the Sussex County Magazine* (Vol XI, No 8) in 1937, A.H. Anderson identified the location of many of the essays in *The Life of the Fields* and *The Open Air* and I follow his findings here. 'The Pageant of Summer', another impassioned piece of nature mysticism, perhaps Jefferies' best-known and most-anthologised essay, was written at Brighton but it contains no specific locations and Anderson finds no evidence that it was directly inspired by Sussex. 'Meadow Thoughts' is entirely based on Wiltshire memories. In

‘Clematis Lane’ Jefferies climbs an unnamed down crowned with a hill-fort overlooking the Weald and chats to a young shepherd about the decline of the famous Pyecombe crook. ‘Nature Near Brighton’ begins with observations of kestrels, gulls, rooks and wheatears in Brighton and Hove, then moves inland to the Downs and describes a wooded park with deer (Arundel?) overlooking a river valley (the Arun?) with distant views of the sea. Lancing Clump is also mentioned. Jefferies was always a keen watcher of the sky and in ‘Sea, Sky, and Down’ he depicts winter effects of light and atmosphere, at sunset and sunrise, over the sea and on the shore and Downs, with a precision Turner and Constable might have envied. The location is not specified but presumably Brighton or Hove and the Downs inland. Anderson thinks ‘January in the Sussex Woods’ may have been inspired by ‘a temporary visit to the Arundel district’. ‘The Hovering of the Kestrel’ and ‘Birds Climbing the Air’ consist of close, almost scientific, observations of the flight of birds, a subject of increasing interest to Jefferies. Notebook entries indicate these pieces were based on observations begun at Brighton in June 1882.

Of the essays in *The Open Air* ‘Wild Flowers’ mentions Hurstpierpoint, the Elizabethan brick mansion at Danny, Wolstanbury Hill, and Arundel Park, but is mostly based on Wiltshire memories. ‘Sunny Brighton’ and ‘The Bathing Season’ are wholly Brighton. ‘Downs’ is a generalised description of the chalk hills which could be either Wilts or Sussex but more probably the latter.

At Brighton Jefferies also wrote his novel *The Dewy Morn* (1884) whose heroine, the beautiful Felise, embodies the love of nature in its purest form. But Jefferies conceived and wrote part of the novel much earlier and though the locations are given fictitious names they are based on Wiltshire. The hill up which Felise runs in Chapter II (called Ashpen in the novel) was, for example, Hackpen. The only hint of Sussex comes in Chapter XLI which Thomas called ‘one of the richest pastoral pictures in English’ and describes the reapers at work in the wheatfield while the August thunder booms far out at sea.

The two years Jefferies spent in Brighton were among the happiest and most creative of his short life; and the Sussex air, light, sea and downs had much to do with the joyful, exalted quality which characterise the writing of this period.

The wounds from the fistula operations did not finally heal until January 1883 and in February Jefferies was again ill, seized with a mysterious wasting disease. ‘The pain was at times so maddening that I dreaded to go a few miles alone by rail lest I should throw myself out of the window of the carriage. I worked and wrote all this time, and some of my best work was done in this intense agony,’ he told C.P. Scott, editor of the *Manchester Guardian.*

The treatment prescribed by the local doctors proved ineffective and in the summer of 1884 Jefferies moved to Eltham in Kent to be nearer London. His illness trapped him in a vicious circle, eating up his savings in doctors’ fees and simultaneously curbing his writing output. His ideas, he said, would only come to him boldly out of doors. His already exquisite sense of colour became even more acute. In the long hot summer days of 1884 he often took

his folding-stool to admire the poppies and white butterflies in a cabbage-field near Eltham because ‘every spot of colour is a sort of food’.

In March 1885 his infant son Oliver Lancelot died of meningitis. The tragedy affected Jefferies so sorely that he was unable to attend the funeral and his elder son Harold recalled the look of agony on his father’s face as he stood in the doorway of the house watching the cortege slowly move away to the churchyard for the burial.

The record of Jefferies’ last years is a story of heroic struggle against what he called the three great giants of Disease, Despair, and Poverty. In April his health broke down again; in May he told C.P. Scott that writing a short note ‘made his pulse beat as if he had been using a sledgehammer’; in June he was starved and semi-delirious. The pain was found to be caused by an ulceration of the intestines. Jefferies compared it variously to ‘the flame of a small spirit lamp continually burning within me’, - ‘a rat always gnaw, gnaw, gnaw, night and day’, - ‘the pain that follows corrosive sublimate which burns the tissues’, He was put on a milk diet, which effected a temporary improvement. To C.P. Scott he described himself as ‘still the veriest shadow of a man’.

On his doctor’s advice Jefferies left Eltham and after six weeks or so at Rehoboth Villa, Jarvis Brook, Rotherfield, the family moved to ‘The Downs’ at nearby Crowborough in the autumn of 1885. ‘The Downs’ was a stone cottage perched some 700 feet up on a ridge in the Weald with magnificent views in all directions that took in Ashdown Forest and Tunbridge Wells. The countryside around Crowborough, a mixture of heath and wooded hills, hopyards and oast-houses, and many small streams, was the last Jefferies was able to explore and he depicted it in ‘Hours of Spring’, ‘April Gossip’, ‘Winds of Heaven’, ‘The Countryside: Sussex’, ‘Buckhurst Park’, ‘Among the Nuts’ and ‘Just Before Winter’ among the essays later collected by his wife and published posthumously in *Field and Hedgerow.*

Crowborough was bracing but windy and exposed and the winter of 1885/6 particularly severe:

> The air was as sharp as a scythe — a rude barbarian giant wind knocking at the walls of the house with a vast club, so that we crept sideways even to the windows to look out upon the world... Never was such a long winter... Snow in broad flakes, snow in semi-flakes, snow raining down in frozen specks, whirling and twisting in fury, ice raining in small shot of frost, howling, sleeting, groaning; the ground like iron, the sky black and faintly yellow — brutal colours of despotism — heaven striking with clenched fist. (‘Hours of Spring’)

Such imagery may have been suggested by the hammer-blows of fate to which Jefferies was subject at this time. In September his spine suddenly seemed to snap and he went down ‘as if I had been shot’. He became daily weaker and more emaciated. To C.P. Scott he described himself as ‘a living man tied to a dead one... mind alive and body dead’. His mind indeed was as active as ever and he continued to write, producing in the midst of his illness some of his most powerful work, essays like ‘Hours of Spring’, ‘The July Grass’, ‘Nature and Books’, and ‘Walks in the Wheatfields’, later collected in *Field and Hedgerow*, ‘Hours of Spring’, an impassioned meditation on mortality and man’s place in nature, was the last essay Jefferies wrote with his own hand. Henceforth he dictated to his wife.

In the autumn of 1886 C.J. Longman persuaded Jefferies to apply to the Royal Literary Fund and with the £100 he received the family moved to 'Sea View' at Goring-on-Sea. Jefferies had visited Goring in the summer of 1870 and may have named Felise Goring in *The Dewy Morn* after the village. In those days there was still open country between Goring and Worthing. The house stood in a lane quaintly named 'Bottom of the Sack' off Sea Lane. The latter was a narrow, rutted way, miry in winter, which led from St Mary's Church at the top end, where there was a sign TO SEA, down to a lonely beach on which the breakers piled in the winter storms. The house looked directly across cornfields to the sea. Harold recalled that from the dining-room window they would often see 'coasters and luggers reaching in to the shore' and his father would identify the rig of the ships passing in the Channel. On the west side of the house was a barn, field path, and vicarage, with great avenues of ilex or evergreen oak on the adjoining Goring Hall estate round which Jefferies had permission to walk. The garden was enclosed by a brick wall to which fruit trees were trained. Near the centre was an old draw-well shaded by a damson; in the south-western corner a summerhouse and arbour.

Jefferies was now an almost complete invalid, confined to bed, sofa, or bath-chair. He could take only short walks round the garden or village. Sometimes he was taken out in a bath chair, occasionally in a phaeton. One local resident, Mrs Rich, who lived in a thatched cottage in Sea Lane, would often meet him and recalled how once he spent considerable time pointing out to her the beautiful structure of the ivy which covered the vicarage wall at the corner. 'I never knew before that there was so much in an ivy leaf.'

Jefferies' condition was now terminal but he continued to compose and dictate. Appropriately one of the last pieces he published during his life-time was an introduction to a new edition of Gilbert White's *The Natural History of Selborne*, a masterpiece of apt and appreciative comment. He continued to fill his notebooks with mystical meditations, occasional nature notes, mainly observations of the flight of birds illustrated by pencil sketches and diagrams to support his thesis that aerial navigation was possible and would soon become commonplace, and sardonic comments on the progress of his disease. 'Many have died once. I have had the misery of dying many times.' In March 1887 he reported to C.P. Scott that he had had a haemorrhage and been too weak to dictate. One of the last persons to see him alive was his friend the artist J.W. North, who visited Jefferies in May. Painfully and with short breaths, supported on either side by North and his wife Jessie, he walked round the garden, pointing out to his friend 'all kinds of queer little natural objects and facts', including the home of a grass snake under a heap of loose stones.

Jefferies did not leave a will as, apart from his MSS, he had nothing to leave. He died at half-past two on Sunday morning, August 14. The death certificate gave 'chronic fibroid phthisis, exhaustion' as cause.

Jessie tended him devotedly during his illness and was with her husband day and night throughout his last days. Their time was spent in prayer together and reading St Luke. Almost Jefferies' last intelligible words were, 'Yes, yes; that is so. Help, Lord, for Jesus' sake. Darling, good-bye. God

bless you and the children, and save you all from such great pain.' Jefferies was buried at Broadwater Cemetery in Worthing.

As he drew near death, Jefferies' thoughts returned more and more unerringly to Wiltshire, as a bird to its tree. His last and finest novel *Amaryllis at the Fair*, written at Crowborough and published in 1887, was largely based on memories of the homestead at Coate and of his parents, his father especially. 'My Old Village', the last piece Jefferies dictated, is a stream-of-consciousness valedictory prose-poem, or piece of prose music, numbingly poignant, in which memories of Coate — the people, houses, footpaths, fields, trees and brooks of his native hamlet — return to haunt the latter-day Orpheus looking back and finding the ghosts of his past lurking round every corner.

But if nothing could replace Wiltshire in Jefferies' imagination, Sussex gave him a landscape not unlike it, with the added stimulus of the sea whose presence pervades the pages of *The Story of My Heart;* and the county can be proud of her part in helping to inspire some of the finest work of an author who holds an assured place in English literature as nature and country writer, social historian, mystic, and prose artist of bewitching power.

Andrew Rossabi

Bibliography;

Anderson, A.H. 'Richard Jefferies and Sussex,' *Sussex County Magazine,* XI (Aug. 1937), 524-30.

Looker, Samuel J. *Concerning Richard Jefferies, by Various Writers.* Worthing: Aldridge Brothers, 1944.

Matthews, Hugoe, and Treitel, Phyllis, *The Forward Life of Richard Jefferies; a chronological study.* Oxford: Petton Books, 1994.

Miller, George, and Matthews, Hugoe. *Richard Jefferies; a bibliographical study.* Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1993.

Thomas, Edward, *Richard Jefferies; His Life and Work.* London: Hutchinson, 1909.