RICHARD JEFFERIES AND COATE

THE CENTENARY OF A GREAT NATURALIST

By REGINALD ARKELL

The centenary of the birth of Richard Jefferies is being marked by a Jefferies Week at Swindon, starting to-morrow. An exhibition will be opened at the Arts Centre by Mr. Reginald Arkell, author of RICHARD JEFFERIES AND HIS COUNTRYSIDE *(Herbert Jenkins, 7s. 6d.).*

ONE hundred years ago, Richard Jefferies was born at Coate, a hamlet just outside Swindon on the Marlborough Road, where his father farmed a smallholding of less than twenty acres. The farm-house, with its few fields, and the famous reservoir—scene of *Bevis*—have since been acquired by the Corporation and developed as a recreation centre.

Not a very romantic background for a great literary reputation, you may suppose, but a glance at the ordnance map will soon correct a too hasty judgment. For this is the point where the delightful Wiltshire Downs fall away into the delightful Vale of White Horse. A mile or so along the Marlborough Road you are crossing the ancient Ridge Way, which leads straight into the heart of the Tom Brown country; and following the downward slope of the hills, you find yourself deep in the pleasant hunting country of Kemble, Cricklade and Cirencester.

Wonderful country for a budding naturalist. Along the straight Roman road to the high village of Baydon, round the winding Ridge Way to White Horse Hill and due south to Savernake Forest, Jefferies tramped as though, in the words of an old flint hawker, he was "looking for summat." On his way to Baydon he would have passed the training quarters of Foxhill, where a millionaire race-owner and theatre proprietor entertained the chorus girls of Daly's at a later day. Also, he would have passed by the little churchyard where that same millionaire lies, shorn of all his glittering prizes. And, if these things had happened in his day, he would have moralised, as one finds him doing in one of his books, on the fact that the labours of such men add little to the sum total of human happiness.

Savernake Forest through which the Bath Road carries you into Marlborough, was one of his farthest points. "As far as the eye can see," he wrote, "an avenue of beech passes right through the forest. The tall smooth trunks rise up to a great height and then branch overhead, looking like the roof of a Gothic cathedral. The growth is so regular and so perfect that here, if anywhere, that order of architecture might have taken its inspiration."

It is impossible to spend five minutes at Coate Farm without finding oneself drawn through the fields at the back towards the fine expanse of water known as the reservoir. The name suggests a square, concrete-lined horror, with walls and water towers, but Coate Reservoir, which ranks in juvenile history with Robinson Crusoe's island, is actually a pleasant inland lake admirably suited to the needs of an imaginative boy. To walk round it as young Jefferies saw it was to lose oneself in trackless jungles. To sail upon it was to know the uncharted seas and wide horizons of Elizabeth's sea-captains. Into it flowed the river Nile, crawling with alligators; and out of it the Mississippi ran, through caverns measureless to man—down to the meadows of the wet Wiltshire plain.

The adventures of Bevis and Mark are based upon the early make-believe games of Richard Jefferies and his younger brother, and the characters are fairly true to the original types. The book is packed with information about sailing, swimming, shooting and so on (all served up in the true buccaneering spirit), and many a man of fifty will share its thrills, even though those vast jungles and those uncharted seas have shrunk most confoundedly with the passing of the years.

Richard Jefferies owed his first literary work of any value, *The Gamekeeper at Home*, to the fact that his father's fields were bounded by Burderop estate. He struck up a warm friendship with Keeper Haylock, who welcomed the boy's assistance in keeping down the vermin on his pheasant preserves. The two spent much of their time together and from the association was born one of the best books Jefferies ever wrote.

COATE FARM-HOUSE, NEAR SWINDON, WILTSHIRE, THE BIRTHPLACE OF RICHARD JEFFERIES

How did the son of a small Wiltshire farmer, even though he had a natural literary bent, manage to become an author? There are tricks to be learned in every trade, and a long and perplexing pilgrimage lies between the parish pump and a publisher's office. A lucky accident led the bewildered lad into the office of the local newspaper; a letter to a great London daily attracted the attention of a magazine editor—and latent talent did the rest. Richard Jefferies became an author in his own right.

He was thirty when *The Gamekeeper at Home* appeared and he died before he was forty. During those ten years he maintained the aggressive output of one who knows that his message is imperative and his time is short. He had so much to say, so little time in which to say it, that traces of hurry are unavoidable. He loved beauty with a passion that, in its extreme manifestations, becomes almost pathological. So much to see; so much to say—and time so short!

This is no apology for poor work produced under difficult conditions, but one may remind

THE GRAND AVENUE, SAVERNAKE FOREST. JEFFERIES WROTE OF IT: "The tall smooth trunks (of the beeches) rise up to a great height and then branch overhead, looking like the roof of a Gothic cathedral."

certain critics (young men with no wolves at their heels) that more things go to the unmaking of a masterpiece than a faulty fountain-pen. The winnowing of Time brings its rewards no less than its ravages. Where there is no chaff there is no corn, and in the granary of Richard Jefferies are many sacks of goodly grain.

But, with such a varied output of books, no two readers seem agreed on their relative values. For one, the factual approach of *Hodge and His Masters*; for another the more literary angle of the later essays. *Bevis* has been hailed as the best boys' book in the language—and as something very far removed from that. Myself, I would start a beginner on *The Amateur Poacher*, thereafter letting him follow his own nose.

There remains *The Story of My Heart*. A famous scientist once told a small boy that if he lay full length on the ground with his face in the grass, held his breath and tried to think of nothing, he would feel the earth going round. Being something of a poet, Richard Jefferies felt much more than that.

It is very proper that his centenary should be celebrated at his birthplace, for almost everything he wrote stemmed from boyhood experiences round about his Wiltshire home. During the next few weeks, many of his admirers will be visiting Coate for the first time—to be met at every step by some oddly familiar feature. Here is the exact setting of *Meadow Thoughts*: the milestone "with the chipped inscription low down—' to London, 79 miles.' So far away, you see, that the very inscription was cut at the foot of the stone, since no one would be likely to want that information. It was half hidden by docks and nettles, despised and unnoticed . . ." Here, opposite the house, with its high wall and the lime trees, is the footpath "lost in the fields, as you might thrust a stick into the grass." And here, in the attic under the roof, one may still look out through the little window framed in pear-blossom—just as Amaryllis did on the day she went to the Fair! "This was her study, her thinking-room, her private chapel and praying-room, her one place of solitude, silence, and retirement."

If you substitute Dick Jefferies for Amaryllis, you have an exact picture of the room in which was cradled the mind of this great natural historian. This bare attic was the nursery of his opening intelligence. Here, when the wolves of debt were baying round the house, the young author courted that serenity of mind on which work of the imagination depends. It is probable that the present occupier looks upon this attic room with mixed feelings. It can have little domestic value, but to the sympathetic visitor it presents an empty stage on which imagination can reconstruct the boyish enthusiasms of a genius not yet half awake.

Once Richard Jefferies had left Coate to make his fortune in London, he never returned to his old home. Yet, in his mind, he was never away from it. Home, to Jefferies, was always "the old house standing by the silent country road, secluded by many a long, long mile and yet again secluded within the great walls of the garden." Always, in his mind, he was returning to the farther end of that broad land of seventy-nine miles. Whether in Surbiton or Sussex, he seemed to be standing at the attic window, looking through the pear-blossom across the meadows where his boyhood had been spent. Across the New Sea, a crazy boat with its home-made sail is running before the wind . . . Up from the Great Plain comes the clash of sword on sword. . . . At the door of the farmhouse Polly, the dairymaid, stands, calling those two desperate adventurers, Mark and Bevis, to their supper. A tall elm throws a last shadow across the quiet country road. . . . High in its hills, Liddington Castle stands solitary guardian to the sleeping Vale. . . .

Along the Sussex Downs and through the Sussex Weald Jefferies found material for his busy pen. Brighton and Beachy Head figure in *The Open Air*, and *Clematis Lane*, included in *The Life of the Fields*, is one of the best of the essays, but as, in the end, we islanders always return to that bit of England that holds our hearts, so Jefferies had to come back to Coate for final inspiration. "No one else," he writes in *My Old Village*, "seems to have seen the sparkle on the brook or heard the music at the hatch, or to have felt back through the centuries; and when I try to describe these things to them they look at me with stolid incredulity. They turn their faces away from me, so that perhaps, after all, I was mistaken, and there never was any such place or any such meadows, and I was never there. And, perhaps, in the course of time, I shall find out also, when I pass away physically that, as a matter of fact, there never was any earth."

The wolves were very close at his heels when he wrote that, for it was published after his death at Goring, near Worthing, on August 14, 1887, when he was only thirty-eight years old.