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HARDY AND RICHARD JEFFERIES

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In the winter of 1880 the publisher George Smith gave a dinner at the Continental Hotel. It was a fascinating gathering: those present, Hardy recalled, included Matthew Arnold, Henry James, and Richard Jefferies. Hardy described the last as 'a modest young man then getting into notice as a writer, through having a year or so earlier published his first successful book, entitled *The Gamekeeper at Home*'.[1] In fact by this date Jefferies had also published *The Amateur Poacher* and *Wild Life in a Southern County,* and had written the bulk of *Greene Ferne Farm, Hodge and His Masters,* and *Round About a Great Estate*—all published by Smith Elder in 1880. The two writers on rural themes must have found a good deal in common, yet the record of their intercourse is very sketchy. They enjoyed a number of mutual literary contacts, including George Smith himself, Frederick Greenwood of *The Pall Mall Gazette,* and their first publisher, William Tinsley. Tinsley clearly saw Jefferies as a second Hardy, and as a keen man of business regretted Jefferies' inability to capitalise on the popularity of rural fiction. Jefferies was an author, he wrote later, 'who disappointed me very much indeed by not making almost a great name as a novelist. He had a wonderful knowledge of English country life, its scenes, people and ways, and a skill in portraying them not surpassed by many authors at any time during this century—such a knowledge as has made many of our best-known writers of fiction.'[2] This apparent failure on Jefferies' part was brought into focus by J. M. Barrie in a survey written in 1889 of Hardy's novels. Barrie concluded that Hardy 'knows the common as well as Mr Jefferies knew it; but he knows the inhabitants, as well as the common'.[3]

Even if this distinction between human and natural is a valid one, the two writers shared so much common ground that it is surely surprising to find so slender a discoverable connexion. That the two were bracketed together in the public mind as writers on country matters is amply attested by Longman's commissions for essays on the Dorset and Wiltshire labourers. Longman intended a series 'on the peasantry of various parts of the kingdom, dealing with their way of life, their surroundings, their hopes and fears, joys and griefs', and he told Jefferies that a piece from Hardy was already expected.[4] Jefferies' 'The Wiltshire Labourer' was published in *Longman's Magazine* in November 1883, four months after Hardy's article, 'The Dorsetshire Labourer'. That Hardy was already acquainted with Jefferies' work is suggested by his typically oblique reference to Jefferies as 'a recent writer on the labouring classes': this suggests Hardy had learnt from *Hodge and His Masters.* A detailed comparison between the two essays cannot be entered into here; I must be content to reiterate Michael Millgate's judgement that Jefferies 'reveals an understanding' of the agricultural crisis 'at once more intimate and more evidently compassionate than Hardy's.[5]

But if Hardy learnt from Jefferies on the agricultural question, Jefferies in his fiction must have benefited from the senior writer's example. After the failure of his early sensation novels, *The Scarlet Shawl, Restless Human Hearts,* and *World's End,*[6] Jefferies wisely chose a simple Wiltshire subject for his fourth novel, *Greene Ferne Farm* (1880). What he wrote of an earlier unpublished novel applies to this work. The scenery., he told the Tinsleys, 'is a description of that found in this county, with every portion of which I have been familiar for many years'. He added that the characters were drawn from life, and that he had incorporated many old Wiltshire traditions.[7] *Greene Ferne Farm* is a fine individual achievement; but the plot of the rivalry for a country heroine, several of the incidents such as the nutting expedition, the church service, and the final wedding-feast, and the characterisation of the

rustic chorus, all surely derive from *Under the Greenwood Tree.* Hardy and Jefferies were perhaps uncomfortably akin; this may be the reason that there is so little acknowledgement of mutual influence. In *Greene Ferne Farm*, for example, Jefferies claimed he was trying to do 'what Whyte-Melville has done for Northampton and Miss Braddon for Yorkshire'.[8]

Hardy was doubtless temperamentally averse to the pantheism of the later Jefferies, as exemplified by *The Story of My Heart* and the last essays. He was also critical of the novels. To a visiting journalist, *a propos Amaryllis at the Fair,* he 'pronounced the opinion that he had never heard farm folk talk in the manner they were made to do in Jefferies' books'.[9] Yet this seems to me less than the whole truth. In *The Dewy Morn* (1884) Jefferies presents a pantheistic heroine acting out her emotional drama against an agricultural society in a state of crisis; a romantic conception of Nature coexists successfully with harsh social realism, in a manner which strikingly prefigures *Tess of the d'Urbervilles.* This must remain pure speculation, but I think the connexions and contrasts are of great significance to the student of Hardy. Millgate suggests that Jefferies' methods were 'too bold and too loose' to be adopted by Hardy; but Douglas Brown claimed of Jefferies, 'the insight, the candour, the modesty and the sensuousness of his prose, and the strange audacity of some strokes of invention in his narratives, lay bare a sort of poverty in all but the finest pages of Hardy.'[10] This goes too far, perhaps; but it might justly be read as a plea that we should look with renewed interest at the related yet contrasting achievements of the two writers.

1 F. E. Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy,* p. 134.

2 William Tinsley, Random *Recollections of* a Publisher "(1900), quoted in S. J. Looker and C. Porteous, Richard *Jefferies, Man of the* Fields (London: The Country Book Club, 1966), p. 105.

3 J. M. Barrie, 'Thomas Hardy: the Historian of Wessex', Contemporary Review (1889), in R. G. Cox (ed.), *Thomas Hardy, The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), p. 158. This contrasts with the view of Gissing, who after a visit to Dorset told his brother that Hardy did not 'know the flowers of the field'.

4 Looker and Porteous, op. cit., pp. 125-6.

5 Michael Millgate, *Thomas Hardy, His Career as a Novelist* (London: The Bodley Head, 1971), pp. 207-8.

6 Elements in these early novels suggest that Jefferies was taking Hardy as a model. The plot of *The Scarlet Shawl,* centring upon the loss of two crucial letters, is mildly reminiscent of Hardy; but *World's End,* in which Jefferies uncharacteristically stresses fate and necessity, may reveal a deeper indebtedness. Such scenes as Esther Herring's visit to the deserted Waldron House in a snowstorm, the decay of nature after the loss of the estate, and the dragging of Kickwell Pot on the eve of the wedding are the products of an art which surely owes something to Hardy.

7 Letter of September 1872 to the Tinsley Brothers, quoted in Looker and Portcous, *op. cit*., p. 102.

8 *ibid., p.* 102. Jefferies here refers to George Whyte-Melville, the prominent sporting novelist, and to M. E. Braddon, the 'Queen of the Circulating Libraries'.

9 W. M. Parker, 'My Visit to Hardy', *Cornhill Magazine*, LXVI (1929), p. 155.

10 Douglas Brown, *Thomas Hardy* (London: Longmans, 1962), p. 143.

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