WEDMORE MEMORIAL LECTURE

This lecture perpetuates the honoured memory of Sir Frederick Wedmore, author and critic, Hon. Fellow of the Royal Society of Painter Etchers. He wrote on art, literature, and drama, specializing in those of France. He was knighted in 1912 ''for services to Art and performances in Literature'. The Lecture was founded by his daughter, Miss Millicent Wedmore, a Member of this Society since 1928

SOME NATURE WRITERS. AND CIVILIZATION

By HENRY WILLIAMSON, F.R.S.L.

(Read on October 1959, Joseph Bard, LL.D., F.R.S.L., in the Chair)

IT is not always immediately apparent to the very young writer that a man's thoughts, and particularly his ideals, arise indirectly from the circumstances of his early environment. Truth has many relatives. And at the end of a life, as Heine the German poet wrote, 'Under every gravestone an entire world lies buried.'

Lacking the views of maturity in my youth, when first I read Richard Jefferies's *The Story of my Heart,* it was to me a revelation of total truth. Indeed, within the first few moments of taking up a copy, in a second-hand bookseller's shop in Folkestone, a month or two after the fighting had stopped on the Western Front, my entire outlook changed. A life devoted more or less to pleasure, after my military duties, was ended. I had found, I believed, my purpose in life: to extend Jefferies's truth of redemption through Nature to my fellow men.

But it was not so much the ideas which shook one on that first occasion in the summer of 1919, as the descriptions of the beauty of the English scene, which arose out of the print upon the pages, and took possession of the spirit. Here was more than consolation, after the sudden ending of the hectic days and nights of war-time, for a vanished world of comradeship, sharing the spirit of the great family of a regiment, upheld by friendship and laughter in the face of death. I do not mean at the moment of death; but that we disregarded the face of death.

And then, suddenly, a new world—the world of boyhood come again, with a mysterious beauty never before seen in words upon the printed page.

> There were grass-grown tumuli on the hills to which of old I used to walk, sit down at the foot of one of them, and think. Some warrior had been interred there in the ante-historic times. The sun of the summer morning shone on the dome of sward, and the air came softly up from the wheat below, the tips of the grasses swayed as it passed sighing faintly, it ceased, and the bees hummed by to the thyme and the heathbells. I became absorbed in the glory of the day, the sunshine, the sweet air, the yellowing corn turning from its sappy green to summer's noon of gold, the lark's song like a waterfall in the sky. I felt at that moment that I was like the spirit of the man whose body was interred in the tumulus; I could understand and feel his existence the same as my own. He was as real to me two thousand years after interment as those I had seen in the body.

Again and again Jefferies returns to the old site of the British encampment on the hill a mile or two from his home, holding himself back as he labours up the last steep slope to the fosse of those fortifications of the Iron Age.

> Moving up the sweet short turf, at every step my heart seemed to obtain a wider horizon of feeling; with every inhalation of rich pure air, a deeper desire. The very light of the sun was whiter and more brilliant here.
>
> By the time I had reached the summit I had entirely forgotten the petty circumstances and annoyances of existence. I felt myself, myself. There was an entrenchment on the summit, and going down into the fosse I walked round' it slowly to recover breath. On the south-western side there was a spot where the outer bank had partially slipped, leaving a gap. There the view was over a broad plain, beautiful with wheat, and inclosed by a perfect amphitheatre of green hills.
>
> I was utterly alone with the sun and the earth. Lying down on the grass, I spoke in my soul to the earth, the sun, the air, and the distant sea far beyond sight. I thought of the earth's firmness—I felt it bear me up; through the grassy couch there came an influence as if I could feel the great earth speaking to me. I thought of the wandering air—its pureness, which is its beauty; the air touched me and gave me something of itself. I

> spoke to the sea: though so far,...brilliance, his endurance and unwearied race. I turned to the blue heaven over, gazing into its depth, inhaling its exquisite colour and sweetness. The rich blue of the unattainable flower of the sky drew my soul towards it, and there it rested, for pure colour is rest of heart. By all these I prayed ... by the sweet thyme, whose little flowers I touched with my hand; by the slender grass; by the crumble of dry chalky earth which I took up and let fall through my fingers. Touching this crumble of earth, the blade of grass, the thyme flower, breathing the earth-encircling air, thinking of the sea and the sky, holding out my hand for the sunbeams to touch it, prone on the sward in token of deep reverence thus I prayed, that I might touch to the unutterable existence infinitely higher than deity.

Now let us return to lower ground; and try and find out who this eccentric young man was.

Richard Jefferies was born in 1848, at Coate Farm, in the parish of Chisledon near Swindon. The farm, scarcely more than a small-holding, lay under the downs. Behind the farmhouse were trees, and then a broad sheet of water, a reservoir for that railway town. Reeds grew around the water. It was the haunt of wildfowl, with two islets near the west shore. Pike lived in the 'broad', with roach, rudd, and perch. There were also water-mussels, some of them six inches in length. This was the scene of *Bevis, the Story of a Boy,* a book of enchantment and magic, if read first when one is young. In it, Jefferies enlarged the scope of his early life, and 'the guv'nor', Bevis's father, is a remote figure, stable and sanguine; so unlike Jefferies's own father, whose whole life was a hopeless struggle against mortgage and all that debt implies. A portrait of this tragic figure—a man of wide natural intellect and feeling—a man who worked for perfection rather than for money—is to be found, with deep sympathy, in Jefferies's best novel, the last one he wrote, or rather dictated, towards the end of his short life—*Amaryllis at the Fair.*

During the latter part of Jefferies's life he was ill as well as poor; and two years before his death he lived in chronic pain. Some doctors thought his illness was imaginary, that he was a hypochondriac, that the wasting away of his body and the pains he suffered were due to hysteria. All during his life he was working: and the theme of his work was the creation of, the burning hope for, a better, truer, more sunlit world of men.

In May 1925, nearly forty years after his death, I made a journey to his birthplace, and stared at the farm-house where he had been born, at the gable window from which he had looked when writing his first pages. I walked round the broad or lake, and thought how much smaller it was than in *Bevis.* It had been made into a public bathing-place, with huts and rails and diving-boards; but the fish were still there. There was talk of turning the farm-house into a Jefferies museum, for a memorial. Soon nothing, I thought, would be left of the place as he knew it, except in those pages of his which glowed and shone with ancient sunlight. While I was musing thus, standing in the roadway before the farm, an old woman came out of a small cot of tarred wood, obviously the work of a labouring man, and scrutinized me. The little black house stood under a hawthorn, then in pink blossom. 'Come to see the house where Loony Dick was born, have ye?' she inquired. We talked for a while. She was remarkable for her vivacity and straight way of looking at things. Years before the war she had adopted a foundling or waif from the Union, the workhouse; raised him as her own child, found him a job when grown up; and then the war came, and killed him. What she could not make up her mind about at the moment, she told me, was whether or not to adopt another 'duel'. There were 'plenty of 'm about', she declared, since the soldiers had gone. Was she too old, did I think? I said surely not, that she had many years to live. 'Don't ye be too sure,' she said, and defied me to guess her age. 'Sixty?' I said. 'Git out,' she replied. 'I knew Loony Dick as a boy, didn't I tell 'ee just now? Moony Dick, some called him. A lazy loppet, he was too. A proper atheist. Lots of folks asks me if I have read those books. Why should I read them? I know it all as well as he. He can't tell me anything new. I've had to work all my life. Why should I read in books what most folks knows already?'

After he had left school, the young Jefferies, a mixture of indolence and sharp imperiousness, got a job on a local paper, which occupied his days. At night he wrote novels and romances in the seclusion of the gable room, which had a pear tree trained against the outer wall. *Caesar Borgia, or the King of Crime; Verses on the Exile of the Prince Imperial; Fortune, or the Art of Success* (he sent this to Disraeli, who returned it with a tactful letter); *Only a Girl*—how he worked, burning candle after candle beyond midnight and into dawn.

While with the *North Wilts. Herald,* he was fortunate in having a sympathetic editor who believed that his young reporter had a rare talent for writing. This belief was justified when, at the age of twenty-four, Jefferies wrote a long letter to *The Times* in London; and *The Times* printed it in full, several thousand words, about the Wiltshire Labourer. It was read and discussed in Swindon; the writer became a local figure. He found him-self, suddenly, to be an authority on agriculture. A London evening newspaper, *The Pall Matt Gazette,* published a series of his articles, anonymously, under the title of *The Game-keeper at Home, or, Sketches of Natural History and Rural Life;* and then another series, *Wild Life in a Southern County.* When these were reprinted in book form, Jefferies was acclaimed as a writer in the class of White of Selborne, and a public of discriminating sportsmen and country people began to look for everything he wrote. By this time he was married to the daughter of a neighbouring farmer, and had a son. At first the young couple lived at Coate Farm, but later took rooms in Swindon.

My work was most uncongenial and useless, but even then sometimes a gleam of sunlight on the wall, the buzz of a bee at the window, would bring the thought to me. Only to make me miserable, for it was a waste of golden time while the rich sunlight streamed on hill and plain. There was a wrenching of the mind, a straining of the mental sinews: I was forced to do this, my mind was yonder. Weariness, exhaustion, nerve-illness often ensued. The insults which are showered on poverty, long struggle of labour, the heavy pressure of circumstances, the unhappiness, only stayed the expression of the feeling. It was always there. Often in the streets of London, as the red sunset flamed over the houses, the old thought, the old prayer came.

Not only in grassy fields with green leaf and running brook did this constant desire find renewal. More deeply still with living human beauty; the perfection of form, the simple fact of form, ravished and always will ravish me away. In this lies the outcome and end of all the loveliness of sunshine and green leaf, of flowers, pure water, and sweet air. This is embodiment and highest expression; the scattered, uncertain, and designless loveliness of tree and sunlight brought to shape. Through this beauty I prayed deepest and longest and down to this hour. The shape—the divine idea of that shape—the swelling muscle or the dreamy limb, strong sinew or curve of bust, Aphrodite or Hercules, it is the same. That I may have the soul-life, the soul-nature, let divine beauty bring to me divine soul. Swart Nubian, white Greek, delicate Italian, massive Scandinavian, in all the exquisite pleasure the form gave, and gives, to me immediately becomes intense prayer.

To be nearer editors, the young writer moved to the suburbs of London, first to Sydenham and then to Surbiton. He worked every day, forcing himself to turn his observations and feelings directly into words. It is one thing to enjoy the natural scene for itself, or for oneself: to relax and be mentally free; it is quite another thing to go out, deliberately to observe—or in the hope of observing something which can be turned into words, words, words, for pence, pence, pence, to support children, wife, and self—in that order. This extraction of feeling in order to produce words for what is called the deadline can eventually turn the grasshopper into a burden. Still the writer has to write, overborne by anxiety. Then his work may become subjective, like that of D. H. Lawrence, who seldom had time to reflect, but must always be using himself up for writing, writing, writing. Thus new wine must be put direct into new

bottles. And when to the worries of economic necessity are conjoined the fevers of tuberculosis, the end is predictable.

Jefferies therefore, has two distinct styles. One is straightforward, concrete, factual; the style of a relaxed or should one say detached man. The other is subjective, candent, a flow of words driven from him as he wrote, by his daemon: the daemon behind his repressed or mortified self. Because of these two distinct styles Jefferies had—whether he has still, I do not know— two kinds of reading public. The one appreciated his straightforward descriptions of country scenes and characters, such as were to be found in *The Amateur Poacher, Wild Life in a Southern County,* and *Hodge and his Masters;* but this reader did not always care for *The Story of my Heart,* and the later essays, many of them dictated, when he spoke about himself and his feelings in relation to the natural world. Personally, I care for all he wrote, for I was as boy and youth and man devoted to Jefferies: he always had and always will have my deepest respect and sympathy.

Behind all the ‘factual’ writings there hovers, often luminously, his desire to express himself fully, in his deep reverence for life. And at last, after so much holding back of his essential thought-feelings—if such a term may be allowed—he began, at Brighton, *The Story of my Heart.* It was a confession.

I have been obliged to write these things by an irresistible impulse which has worked in me since early youth. They have not been written for the sake of argument, still less for any thought of profit, rather indeed the reverse. They have been forced from me by earnestness of heart, and they express my most serious convictions. For seventeen years they have been lying in my mind, continually thought of and pondered over. I was not more than eighteen when an inner and esoteric meaning began to come from all the visible universe, and indefinable aspirations filled me. I found them in the grass fields, under the trees, on the hill-tops, at sunrise, and in the night. There was a deeper meaning everywhere. The sun burned with it, the broad front of morning beamed with it; a deep feeling entered me while gazing at the sky in the azure noon, and in the star-lit evening.

I was sensitive to all things, to the earth under, and the star-hollow round about; to the least blade of grass, to the largest oak. They seemed like exterior nerves and veins for the conveyance of feeling to me. Sometimes a very ecstasy of exquisite enjoyment of the entire visible universe filled me. I was aware that in reality the feeling and the thought were in me, and not in the earth or sun; yet I was more conscious of it when in company with these. A visit to the sea increased the strength of the original impulse. I began to make efforts to express these thoughts in writing, but could not succeed to my own liking. Time went on, and harder experiences, and the pressure of labour came, but in no degree abated the fire of first thought. Again and again I made resolutions that I would write it, in some way or other, and as often failed . . . had I not made it personal I could scarcely have put it into any shape at all. But I felt that I could not longer delay, and that it must be done, however imperfectly. I am only too conscious of its imperfections, for I have as it were seventeen years of consciousness of my own inability to express this the idea of my life ...

He moved house again, from Brighton to Eltham, then in Kent but now, alas, in London. Soon he was moving back to Sussex, first at Rotherfield, then to Crowborough. Those living, moving essays in *The Life of the Fields* and *The Open Air* were published about this time, 1884-5. Then restlessly on again, to Goring-on-Sea, where he broke down. He was suffering, not from hysteria as the doctors had declared, but from tuberculosis of the lungs and the intestines, and the intestines were ulcerated as well. Also he had fistula, which is a torturing thing. There is a letter to his publisher, Charles Longman, at this’ time in which he wrote:

My wearied and exhausted system constantly craves rest. My brain is always asking for rest. I never sleep. I have not slept now for five years properly, always waking, with broken bits of sleep, and restlessness, and in the morning I get up more weary than I went to bed.

Rest, that is what I need. You thought naturally that it was work I needed; but I have been at work, and next time I will tell you all of it. It is not work, it is REST for the brain and the nervous system. I have always had a suspicion that it was the ceaseless work that caused me to go wrong at first.

It has taken me a long time to write this letter; it will take you but a few minutes to read it. Had you not sent me to the sea in the spring I do not think that I should have been alive to write it. Still he worked on, so weak now that he must dictate to his wife: and his beautiful novel *Amaryllis at the Fair* was completed just in time. A painter friend has described his physical appearance in that cottage at Goring where Jefferies lived with his wife and two small children, in the thirty-eighth and last year of his life.

It was in the early summer, two or three months before his death, that I saw Jefferies for the last time alive. He had then been living at Goring for some short time, and this was my first visit to him there. I was pleased to find that his house was far pleasanter than the dreary and bleak cottage which he had rented at Crowborough. It had a view of the sea, a warm southern exposure, and a good and interesting garden: in one corner a quaint little arbour, with a pole and vane, and near this centre a genuine old-fashioned draw-well. Poor fellow! Painfully, with short breathing, and supported on one side by Mrs. Jefferies and on the other by myself, he walked round this enclosure, noticing and drawing our attention to all kinds of queer little natural objects and facts. Between the well and the arbour was a heap of rough, loose stones, overgrown by various creeping flowers. This was the home of a common snake, discovered there by Harold, and poor Jefferies stood, supported by us, a yard or so away and peered into every little cranny and under every leaf with eyes well used to such a search until some tiny gleam, some minute cold glint of light, betrayed the snake. Weakness and pain seemed forgotten for the moment—alas! only for the moment. Uneasily he sat in the little arbour telling me how his disease seemed still to puzzle the doctors; how he felt well able in mind to work, plenty of mental energy, but so weak, so FEARFULLY WEAK, that he could no longer write with his own hand; that his wife was patient and good to help him. He had nobody to come and talk with him of the world of literature and art. Why couldn't I come and settle by? There was plenty to paint. Though Goring itself was one of the ugliest places in the world, there was Arundel, and its noble park, and river, and castle close by. I must go and see it the very next day, and see whether I could not work there, and come back every day and cheer him. I was the best doctor, after all.

Poor fellow! I did not then know or believe that he was so utterly without sympathetic society except his devoted wife. It was so. I am one of the dullest companions in the world; but I had sympathy with his work, and knowledge, too, of his subjects. Well, nothing would do but that I must go to Arundel the next day, and Mrs. Jefferies must show me the town. 'He would do well enough for one day. A good neighbour would come in, and with little Phyllis and the maid he would be safe.'

Therefore we went to Arundel (a short journey by train), and on coming back found him standing against the door-post to welcome us.

I have seldom been more touched than by my experience of that evening, finding, amongst other things, that he had partly planned and insisted on this Arundel trip to get us away so that he might, unrebuked, spend some of his latest hard earnings in a pint of 'Perrier Jouet' for my supper.

Do you know Goring churchyard? It is one of those dreary, overcrowded, dark spots where the once-gravelled paths are green with slimy moss, and it was a horror to poor Jefferies. More than once he repeated the hope that he might not be laid there, and he chose the place where his widow at last left him—amongst the brighter grass and flowers of Broadwater.

He died at Goring at half-past two on Sunday morning, August 14, 1887.

After Jefferies's death there was controversy about his having died a Christian, or not. Before losing consciousness, he asked his wife to read a chapter of the New Testament to him, and whispered at the end, 'It is true, it is true.' There were attacks on his work, particularly on *The Story of my Heart,* among them one in *The Girls' Own Paper.*

It is true that during his life he had few acquaintances or friends. Perhaps it would not be wholly untrue to say that he died half-way through his life because he had lived too intensely by the spirit, lacking a living spirit like himself for companion. There was in another part of England a rising and abused writer named Hardy; but these two never chanced to meet.* Richard Jefferies's friends were to be, as once he told Roger Ingpen, in posterity. Ingpen, it may be recalled, was the compiler of the *Julian* edition of Shelley; he was the brother-in-law of Walter de la Mare, in whose house, in 1920, he gave me a description of Jefferies—thin, tall, blue-eyed, bearded, aloof, courteous, as he came into the office of Smith, Elder and Company, with whom the youthful Roger Ingpen was learning publishing, to be told that his books were not selling at all. 'One day, I think they will be read', said Jefferies on his last visit there, to the silent youth behind the desk.

There are two kinds of emotion felt by an author—actual feeling as a human being; and emotion while writing, often called literary emotion. This literary emotion can rise to the freeing of the imagination, whereby his best work is done: this is called the spirit of truth. Or it may descend to a relief of personal constrictions, and be merely unhappy writing that makes no appeal to the imagination of the reader, being of the letter of truth on the level from which the reader wishes to escape. How much of the *Story* was literary emotion? Did Jefferies actually have the strong feelings at the times and places he described in his *Story,* or were they exaggerated while he was writing, the body being in abeyance, and the feelings in a fume of 'nerve-illness'?

My heart looks back and sympathises with all the joy and life of ancient time. With the circling dance burned in still attitude on the vase; with the chase and the hunter eagerly pursuing, whose javelin trembles to be thrown; with the extreme fury of feeling, the whirl of joy in the warriors from Marathon to the last battle of Rome, not with the slaughter, but with the passion—the life in the passion; with all the breathing busts that have panted beneath the sun.

O beautiful human life! Tears come in my eyes as I think of it. So beautiful, so inexpressibly beautiful!

So deep is the passion of life that, if it were possible to live again, it must be exquisite to die pushing the eager breast against the sword. In the flush of strength to face the sharp pain joyously, and laugh in the last glance of the sun—if only to live again, now on earth, were possible. So subtle is the chord of life that sometimes to watch troops marching in rhythmic order, undulating along the column as the feet are lifted, brings tears in my eyes. Yet could I have in my own heart all the passion, the love and joy, that burned in the breasts that have panted, breathing deeply, since the hour of Ilion, yet still

I should desire more. How willingly I would strew the paths of all with flowers; how beautiful a delight to make the world joyous! The song should never be silent, the dance never still, the laugh should sound like water which runs for ever.

My young self could not agree with H. M. Tomlinson in 1924 when he murmured to me in the Temple Bar restaurant in the Strand that *The Story of my Heart* was a dangerous book; but later I realized how it could be damaging to any young man akin to Jefferies who accepts what stands out of the pages for him as absolute truth. Then it may add to his imbalance, and cause his health and living to suffer in unsocial loneliness.

And here may I intrude a personal confession: how the misreading of one word in Jefferies caused me, for nearly a year while working in Fleet Street, in 1920, to come near to a nervous breakdown. *Where man goes, nature ends:* how true, how tragic, how dreadful were the new

houses going up on the fields, and the sites of cleared woods and coverts I had known in boy-hood! I struggled in my mind to obliterate them. I struggled, too, against the motor omnibuses along the Embankment below Fleet Street, against the smoke in the sky, and the pollution of the Thames; I suffered for the brook called the Fleet, now a sewer and underground, but once a spawning-place of salmon, with willow trees on its banks. I struggled to dissolve the past, and to grow willows on the banks of the Thames once more. Man had gone there, and so nature was no more.

But Jefferies had written, *When man goes, nature ends.* For man, to Jefferies, was the sum oF nature, and the world was in man's care, under a Spirit 'higher than deity' as he had declared in his *Story.*

Nevertheless, despite my illusion, in that perfervid year of 1920, when I was writing my first book, I had already realized the difference between my expressed ideals and my actual behaviour; and was seeking, in some perplexity, to find the answer to the question: How far was a man unbalanced by the negations of his childhood, and how much was due to inherited traits? Supposing Jeff cries to have grown up in happy mental freedom, would *The Story* ever have been written? And had he realized, after it was written, why his nature had instinctively refused to face up to such a task: because his mind would have to live again its own mortifications, which originally had caused the mental straining-away from normal ease, which led to the eventual break-down of his body? D. H. Lawrence once wrote that Jefferies must have 'winced away' from this book, after publication. Perhaps the best medium for such feeling is music: Delius.

There was another writer who looked askance at *The Story of my Heart*—a writer who, today, has suffered a period of eclipse— W.H.Hudson.

Hudson came to England From the Argentine in 1874. He was seven years old when Richard Jefferies was born, and survived him by nearly thirty-three years. This is what Hudson wrote in his book, *Nature in Downland,* which was published in 1900, before Belloc and Kipling, one supposes, had gone to live in Sussex:

We may say of Sussex that its native writers have done nothing, or nothing worth doing, for it; and that no outside writers of note have come to its aid, as has happened in the case of some other counties. Had Richard Jefferies lived it would, I believe, have been different. It is true that his soul was dyed, and dyed deeply, in that North Wilts nature which he had first beheld, where his revelation came to him; but the visible world was too much for him, and his senses too well trained, to let him rest satisfied with memories; and we may see in *The Story of my Heart* and some other of his writings, that the Sussex coast country where he found a home powerfully attracted and held him. The thirteen years that have passed since his sad death would have brought his splendid powers, always progressing until the last day of his life, to their fullest maturity: perhaps, too, that strain of intense unnatural feeling, which he so strangely misinterpreted, and which in his book just named touches the borders of insanity, would have been outgrown. I am not sure that he had not outlived that phase before he died, since his latest work is decidedly of a higher quality and, even when most inspired by passion, essentially more sober than the famous *Story.* That he would eventually have written a book about the downs and the maritime district of Sussex, as good as any work we have had from him, I feel certain.

Jefferies was much in my mind just now because by chance I happen to be writing this chapter in the last house he inhabited, and where he died, in the small village of Goring, between the sea and the West Sussex downs.

A strange, I had almost said a mysterious, adventure befell me as I came hither. On a cloudy melancholy day in September I came in search of this cottage, and walking to the church by a narrow lane with a low trim wall-like hedge on either side, my thoughts were of Jefferies, who had doubtless often walked here, too, feeling the icy hand on him of one that

walked invisible at his side. My mind was full of sadness, when, hearing the crunching of gravel beneath other feet than my own, I suddenly looked up, and behold, there before me stood the man himself, back on earth in the guise of a tramp! It was a most extraordinary coincidence that at such a moment I should have come face to face with this poor outcast and wanderer who had the Jefferies countenance as I knew it from portraits and descriptions. It was the long thoughtful suffering face, long straight nose, flowing brown beard, and rather large full blue eyes. I was startled by the expression, the unmistakable stamp of a misery that was anguish and near to despair and insanity. He passed me, then paused, and after a moment or two, said hesitatingly, 'Can you spare me a penny?' I gave him something without looking at his face again, and went on my way sorry that I had met him, for I knew that those miserable eyes would continue to haunt me.

Here, sitting in the room that was his—the author of the strange *Story*—the morning sun filling it with brightest light, the sounds he listened to coming in at the open window—the intermittent whispering of the foliage and the deeper continuous whisper of the near sea, and cries and calls of so many birds that come and go in the garden, each 'deep in his day's employ'—I cannot but think of him and lament again that he was prematurely torn away from this living green world he worshipped.

Having read the passage from *Nature in Downland* again recently, I turned to Hudson's *Far Away and Long Ago,* to refresh myself over a description of himself in adolescence, after an illness in which he had faced, with unutterable anguish, the idea of death and extinction.

Fifteen years old! It was as though I had only just become conscious; I doubt that I had ever been fully conscious before. I had lived till now in a paradise of vivid sense-impressions in which all thoughts came to me saturated with emotion, and in that mental state reflection is well-nigh impossible. Even the idea of death, which had come as a surprise, had not made me reflect. Death was a person, a monstrous being who had sprung upon me in my flowery paradise and had inflicted a wound with a poisoned dagger in my flesh. Then had come the knowledge of the immortality of the soul, and the wound was healed, or partly so, for a time at all events; after which the one thought which seriously troubled me was that I could not always remain a boy . . .

What, then, did I want?—what did I ask to have? If the question had been put to me then, and if I had been capable of expressing what was in me, I should have replied: I want only to keep what I have; to rise each morning and look out on the sky and the grassy dew-wet earth from day to day, from year to year. To watch every June and July for spring, to feel the same old sweet surprise and delight at the appearance of each familiar flower, every new-born insect, every bird returned once more from the north. To listen in a trance of delight to the wild notes of the golden plover coming once more to the great plain, flying, flying south, flock succeeding flock the whole day long. Oh, those wild beautiful cries of the golden plover! I could exclaim with Hafiz, with but one word changed: 'If after a thousand years that sound should float o'er my tomb, my bones uprising in their gladness would dance in the sepulchre!" To climb trees and put my hand down in the deep hot nest of the Bien-te-veo and feel the hot eggs—the five long pointed cream-coloured eggs with chocolate spots and splashes at the larger end. To lie on a grassy bank with the blue water between me and the beds of tall bulrushes, listening to the mysterious sounds of the wind and of hidden rails and coots and courlans conversing together in strange human-like tones; to let my sight dwell and feast on the *camalote* flower amid its floating masses of moist vivid green leaves— the large alamanda-like flower of a purest divine yellow that when plucked sheds its lovely petals, to leave you with nothing but a green stem in your hand. To ride at noon on the hottest days, when the whole earth is a-glitter with illusory water, and see the cattle and horses in thousands, covering the plain at their watering-places; to visit some haunt of large birds at that still, hot hour and see storks, ibises, grey herons, egrets of a dazzling whiteness, and

rose-coloured spoonbills and flamingoes, standing in the shallow water in which their motionless forms are reflected. To lie on my back on the rust-brown grass of January and gaze up at the wide hot whitey-blue sky, peopled with millions and myriads of glistening balls of thistledown, ever, ever floating by; to gaze and gaze until they are to me living things and I, in an ecstasy, am with them, floating in that immense shining void.

Hudson was seventy-seven years of age when he wrote that passage, twice the age of Jefferies when Jefferies died. In it is apparent the tranquillity of recollected emotion; in Jefferies's *Story* the emotion pours out upon the pages, and yet with discipline, except in one or two brief passages when the disease consuming his life momentarily gets the poor man down, and he feels the sense of failure when life is closing upon him.

I live by the sea now; I can see nothing of it in a day . . .

(Jefferies, of course, is writing afterwards, when the day had passed, as days do when they are over, swifter than the illusion of time.)

. . . why, I do but get a breath of the sea, and the sun sinks well before I have begun to think.

(He is in a race with Death, there is no time to do all he wants to do in his mind, to be everyone and everything, to know all things on and in and beyond the earth and the stars: this poor Lucifer, this Lightbringer out of that shut-in farm-house, where mother nagged father, and father was going downhill on a small farm, raising mortgage and then second mortgage, while knowing that nothing nothing nothing could stop the 'miserable end', as his son Richard had written in *Hodge and his Masters,* that superb record of Victorian agricultural England.)

Life is so little and so mean. I dream sometimes backwards of the ancient times. If I could have the bow of Ninus, and the earth full of wild bulls and lions, to hunt them down, there would be rest in that. Still I should desire greater strength and a stouter bow, wilder creatures to combat. The intense life of the senses, there is never enough for them. I envy Semiramis; I would have been ten times Semiramis. I envy Nero, because of the great concourse of beauty he saw. I should like to be loved by every beautiful woman on earth, from the swart Nubian to the white and divine Greek.

There is the cry of fatigue, the cry of the tired child for the warmth and security, for the quietude of peace that passeth what T. E. Lawrence, in a letter to me, once called the 'horrific convolutions of the mind'.

Now let us return to his 'friend' W. H. Hudson—the friend who never met him in the flesh—in particular to Miss Ruth Tomalin's brief but revealing biography of W. H. Hudson. Hudson did not want his biography to be written after his death. A sense of failure had overcome him, due to the circumstances of his living in London; for the green earth is always ready to refresh the spirit of man, however old and finished he may consider himself, provided that love is by his side. But love was not by Hudson's side. In the despair of his last years he burned many of his papers including some of the manuscripts of his splendid books, while the sick falcon was immewed in London. Such a spirit, possessing the 'enlarged and numerous senses' of the poet, sometimes dies under the burden of loneliness before his physical frame collapses. The peregrine falcon, the boldest bird that flies, will languish and die if deprived of its native air.

Mrs. Hudson was older than Hudson, and did not always hide, says Miss Tomalin, her antipathy to the gathering of her husband's friends at her boarding-house, usually on Sunday afternoons.

After one of these tea-parties, when the atmosphere had been more strained and unhappy than usual, Hudson accompanied to the door a woman guest who burst into tears and exclaimed passionately, 'Why do you stay here? Why don't you find someone to love, and go

away?' Herself happily married, she was taken aback by the quiet desperation of his answer: 'Oh, I have loved you for years. *For years'*

Were these men so very different? Jefferies the Nordic type, and Hudson the dark Celt? One thinks of Wagner, of Strindberg, of Ibsen as enduring, and dreaming, in a life pattern formed by millennia of generations amidst the ice and snow of northern mists about a land that hardly supported life; while the Celts were of a softer climate, with wider warmths of nature that made the pattern of their minds quick and sensitive to changes of light and shade. But all mammals suffer greatly without the security of love that the spirit of life needs for its true progress.

Were, then, Jefferies's ideas entirely pathological, those of a sick man: one who, through circumstances of an unmatched marriage, had never lived all of himself? Like D. H. Lawrence, another Nordic type, Jefferies was always moving house; restless; homeless; tubercular.

What man who lived naturally—that is, with mind and body worked in harmony, with hand-work and mind-work in balance —would feel as Jefferies wrote in his *Story?*

Now, as my survey comes near to its close, may I recall a visit to that cottage where Jefferies had lived, and after him Hudson, at Goring. I saw the room where he had dictated *Amaryllis at the Fair* to his wife; and where his small children, as he lay dead, had put their arms round his head, and kissed him, and begged him to speak to them. There was the little summer-house, where he had seen the glint of the slow-worm's eye; and the narrow lane beside the cottage which led to the English Channel, where Hudson had seen the tramp with misery in his eyes.

From there I walked to the churchyard, to look among the tombstones and mounds, seeking the grave of Richard Jefferies. While I was going slowly among the long grasses around the mounds for the second time, an old man came to me and said, 'Are you looking for the grave of Jefferies?' 'Yes,' I replied. 'I thought you must be, from your face,' he said; 'one can always tell a Jefferies lover.' 'Are there many?' I asked. 'Just a stray one now and then, like yourself. But Jefferies isn't buried here, this is the old burial ground, the new cemetery is over there,' and he pointed to some trees across the road. There I went, and after search found the grave, and sat on the mown grassy edge, and wondered if Jefferies were near in the sunshine. Hawkbits were in flower there, blazing like small suns out of the grass. It seemed right that these were not scythed in that place, for he had loved them as the sun itself.

While I was sitting by the white marble edging of the tomb— how Jefferies dreaded white marble and cemeteries!—put up by his admirers, another man came along and told me that the last person to sit on the turf by the grave was an old gentleman with a beard and the eyes of an eagle, who had told him, one of the gardeners of the cemetery, that he would like to be buried near Jefferies when his time came. I had previously said the same thing to the gardener, and this had called forth the memory. 'In due course that old gentleman was buried here,' said the gardener. 'He lies yonder. You may have heard of him, his name was Hudson, and he came to Goring because his friend was buried here.'

I have told before this how I went to Jefferies's birth-place, in 1925, and met the old woman who didn't want to read Moony Dick's books because she knew already what was in them; but when I revisited Coate Farm in 1936, what a change from ten years previously! A wide new motor-highway in front of the farm-house, cars and lorries and buses passing all day long and half the night, the old woman's tarred wooden cot gone—the place was now part of another age. A large notice board announced the bathing pool of the Swindon Corporation as being in RICHARD JEFFERIES COUNTRY. Thousands of people were swimming, boating, walking about. It was August. A tier of ferro-concrete diving platforms arose out of Bevis's lake. Also there was a new, special swimming-pool, which was reached by the bathers only by way of a chloride of lime foot-bath. Within the enclosure about a hundred

youths and girls were water-playing, swimming, idling, sun-bathing. Was Jefferies near in spirit, I wondered to myself, as I reclined in the heat of the sun, my half-closed eyes dazzled by the broken ripple-reflections. And while I lay there an echo of my youthful fervours for *The Story of my Heart* sounded like the music of humanity in my mind.

How pleasant it would be each day to think, To-day I have done something that will tend to render future generations more happy. The very thought would make this hour sweeter. It is absolutely necessary that something of this kind should be discovered. First, we must lay down the axiom that as yet nothing has been found; we have nothing to start with; all has to be begun afresh. All courses or methods of human life have hitherto been failures. Some course of life is needed based on things that are, irrespective of tradition. The physical ideal must be kept steadily in view.

I deny altogether that idleness is an evil, or that it produces evil, and I am well aware why the interested are so bitter against idleness—because it gives time for thought, and if men had time to think their reign would come to an end.

I hope succeeding generations will be able to be idle. I hope that nine-tenths of their time will be leisure time; that they may enjoy their days, and the earth, and the beauty of this beautiful world; that they may rest by the sea, and dream; that they may dance and sing, and eat and drink. I will work towards that end with all my heart.

Sitting in the sun after bathing in the pool, I could not help thinking that the spirit of Richard Jefferies would have approved the change, for it looked as though ‘the physical ideal was being steadily kept in view’, in his words. And today, another twenty years on, what does one think about the countryside, with its streams of motor-cars, and atomic power stations being built in the places which were the haunts of wild birds and solitary men like Hudson and Jefferies?

But to come to a wider aspect: surely Jefferies, living among us today, would agree that, from the sufferings of the past, including two world wars, the finest generation, physically speaking, that our country has ever seen, is now coming to flower?

I write these words after our North Devon Festival week, and particularly a night spent among boys and girls listening to and living joyfully in the rhythms of Humphrey Lyttelton’s band in the Queen’s Hall at Barnstaple. There was a shimmer of life in the hall; hundreds of happy faces below the platform, eagerly watching, happily listening, gently swaying; and there was tenderness, too, among the young people, as pony-tailed heads were gently stroked within protecting arms of teen-age boys. I thought of linnets among the gorse in bloom upon the Sussex downs, almost dreamily uttering their gentle notes in the south wind; I thought, too, that one of the alternative titles of Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* was *Tenderness.* And it seemed to me with my own memories of such poverty seen among less fortunate people in my boyhood and early youth—of young children with almost old faces prematurely set to endure misery— the faces which Jefferies had seen in the slums of Swindon—it seemed to me that now the age of so-called ‘idleness’, or leisure to relax, was a possibility: and that possibility was in part due to two wars after which, despite all, the slums had begun to die. And that the ‘near-madness’ of the fully articulate of one age can sometimes be sanity and clear-sightedness to the next.

But we must not condemn those who do not perceive so quickly as the visionaries, for it is only a question of time; and in the words of Richard Jefferies, ‘Now is eternity; now is the immortal life.’

* *Postscript.*

Since reading this paper, the lecturer has received, and now acknowledges with grateful thanks, a letter from Mrs. F. J. Gay, of Swindon, Secretary-Chairman of the Richard Jefferies

Society, stating that Hardy and Jefferies *did* meet one another. The occasion is recorded, in *The Early Life of Thomas Hardy,* by Florence Hardy, as follows:

'The same week (2 February 1880) Hardy met Matthew Arnold—probably for the first time—at a dinner given by Mr. G. Murray Smith, the publisher, at the Continental Hotel, where also were present Henry James and Richard Jefferies— the latter 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* (1878).'