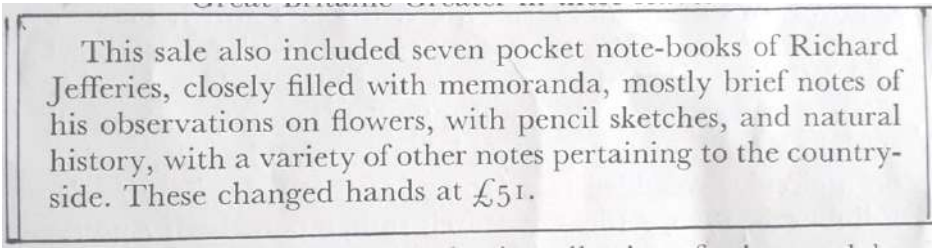
JEFFERIES' NOTEBOOKS FOR SALE

This article by Jean Saunders was published in the Richard Jefferies Society Newsletter Spring 2021 pp.20–24

In August 2020 Robert Brown, a long-standing Richard Jefferies Society member, supplied me with a cutting from *The Connoisseur* dated 1942 that highlighted an auction at Hodgson's held on 16 April 1942. Seven of Richard Jefferies' notebooks sold and fetched £51. Samuel J. Looker is known to have been the buyer.



This sale also included seven pocket note-books of Richard Jefferies, closely filled with memoranda, mostly brief notes of his observations on flowers, with pencil sketches, and natural history, with a variety of other notes pertaining to the country-side. These changed hands at £51.

Not only is there some confusion about the total number of notebooks that Jefferies' kept but Looker's memory of them. Just before he died in 1965, he wrote :

> At auction … I obtained four of Jefferies' notebooks [1937].[1] These cost £5. When eight more arrived at the sale-room a few years later I had to pay £51 for them. Later still I bought four further notebooks from my friend Mrs. [Phyllis] Hargrave, Jefferies' daughter. The sixteen (there should have been twenty-four in all) were all that survived. Eight short: those written during his most creative years, and every effort to trace them, continued to this day, has failed. [2]

Over twenty years earlier, in 1943, Looker wrote: 'Last April … I was fortunate enough to secure in the sale-room after spirited bidding, seven more notebooks … I obtained fifteen in all.'[3] So most confusing!

In one of her earliest letters to Looker (19 July [1942]), Phyllis Hargrave mentions the last four notebooks she planned to sell:

> I am thinking of sending four more notebooks to Messrs Hodgson but perhaps you would like to buy them as I think you purchased some I sent to their sale a short

[1] *The Nature Diaries and Note-Books of Richard Jefferies*, edited by Samuel Looker (Billericay: The Grey Walls Press, 1941), p.35. Notebook contents quoted come from numbers V, XI, XIX and XXIV.

[2] *Richard Jefferies: Man of the Fields* by Samuel J. Looker and Crichton Porteous (London: John Baker, 1965), p.xvi.

[3] *Jefferies' England* edited by Looker (London: Constable, 1943), p.270.

time ago, these are the last ones I have. I know you make such good use of them & appreciate them.

Life is so uncertain & I have no one to leave them to & should not like them to fall into unappreciative hands some day.

These four are particularly good & full of interest…[4]

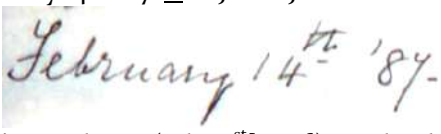
In her next letter to Looker (27 July [1942]) she wrote:

I send you by registered post one of the note books, the date inside, Feb 14th '87, [i.e. NB XXIII] is in my mother's writing, which was just six months before my father died & probably the last note book he used. I do not like parting with these little books at all but feel they would be safe in your hands especially if you will leave them to the nation.

I am offered £20 for the four, perhaps that is more than you wish to give.

I sometimes feel perhaps I ought to destroy them & not put them in the market at all but these times are hard for everybody.

Indeed, the date 'February 14th '87' is in Jessie Jefferies' hand-writing.



By the time of Phyllis's next letter (July 31st[1942]), Looker had sent her a cheque for £20. She wrote:

Thank you for your letter & cheque for £20. I am hurrying to acknowledge these & send the other three note books…

And by August 4th[1942] Phyllis writes:

I have had the note books for many years & I could never bring myself to part with them. I have often been on the point of destroying them yet could not bear to do that either. However I feel confident now that they are in good hands. I am sorry that the price was high but I have my brother & his large family (seven) to consider as well as myself.

According to Phyllis's letter of 27 July 1942, she thought she might be sending Looker her father's last notebook. But there were two more that are now part of the British Library collection, and Looker bought notebook XXIV in 1937 that he seems to have forgotten too!

Looker sold his collection to the antiquarian Col. H.L. Bradfer-Lawrence and when he died in 1965, the collection was on loan to the Fitzwilliam Museum. In

[4] Phyllis's letters to Samuel Looker are sent from Overdale, Cox, Perranporth. She does not include the year but the envelope, addressed to 'S. J. Looker Esq, Book Nook, Grange Road, South Green, Billericay, Essex,' is postmarked: 'Truro, Cornwall, 5pm, 19 July 1942' along with a 2½ pence stamp. The letters are part of the Richard Jefferies Society's Looker Archive held at the Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre, Chippenham.

May 1975 the collection was bought by the British Library. What is certain is that there are sixteen little notebooks in the archives of the British Library.[5] But there are at least another eight or nine notebooks. Where are they?

Jessie Jefferies allowed Sir Walter Besant access to the notebooks to write his *Eulogy*[6] for her husband. Besant wrote on p.173:

> I have before me a great number of note-books filled with observations, remarks, ideas, hints, and suggestions of all kinds by him. He carried them about during his walks, and while he was always watching the infinite wealth and variety of Nature, the multitudinous forms of life, he was always noting down what he saw. To read these note-books is like reading an unclassified index to the works of Nature.

and he quotes extracts 'taken at random from two or three' of them starting with an entry from 16 October 1878 and ending on 21 May [1879]. Notebook II runs to July 1878 whilst number V starts on 24 May 1879. This suggests the entries are from notebook IV (perhaps also III). Maybe, as a thank you and memento for writing the *Eulogy*, Jessie let Besant keep notebooks III and IV.

Might Jessie have sold some?[7] Phyllis was clearly reluctant to part with her father's notebooks and her brother Harold shared in any profits from sales as part of Jessie's instructions in her Will. But would Jessie have sold any to help her children? Jessie was certainly a loving mother and a dutiful wife, but did she have the same loving attachment to Richard and his works?

In his notebook XXIII Richard expresses his despair at the height of his suffering. He writes on 2 May 1887 (folio 28), three months before his death:

> No hope— no gratitude, to whom—/—no <u>love</u> —no heart to turn/to—

---

[5] Notebooks numbered I, III, IV, VIII, XV, XVII, XVIII, XX and XXI are missing.
The others are dated as follows— 1876–?, II: March–10 July 1878, V: 24 May–30 July 1879, VI: 31 July–27 Oct. 1879, VII: 4 March–14 June 1879; IX: 14 Oct. '80–17 Sep. '81, X: 26 Sep. '81–24 Mar. '83, XI: 4 Apr.–25 Sep 1883, XII: Nov. 1883–April 1884, XIII: 21 May–4 Oct. 1884, XIV: 5 Oct. 1884–March 1885, XVI: 5 June–23 Aug. 1886, XIX: 1–9 Jan. 1887, XXII: 14 Feb.–8 Mar. 1887, XXIII: 2 Apr.–16 May 1887 and XXIV: 19 May–7 June 1887.

[6] T*he Eulogy of Richard Jefferies* by Walter Besant (London, Chatto & Windus, 1888), pp.173–178.

[7] Did Jessie experience hard times around 1901 when she was trying to sort out her son Harold. She informs Thomas Mosher that Harold was 'very anxious to find some employment other than the sea. Though he has followed it for so many years (he is now 27) he gets to dislike it more and more.' Jessie sold 'The Chaffinch' poem to Thomas Mosher the year before. Jessie and Phyllis were living at 257 Chesterfield Road in Ashford at the time of the 1901 census (31 March). Harold's name cannot be found on this record, so he might have still been at sea, but there is a letter from Harold to Mosher from this address, also dated 4 January 1902, where he is clearly seeking work. It seems that Harold's uncle, Robert Billing, gave him a proof-reading job, based in Guildford, in 1902 before he emigrated to Canada in 1905. No doubt Jessie and Phyllis's move to Chiddingfold, just eleven miles away from Guildford, where both Richard's brother Charlie and sister Sarah (Billing) were living, was to enable Harold to work for Robert Billing.

When Edward Thomas requested access to the notebooks whilst researching work for his biography of Jefferies,[8] Jessie informed him that her son, Harold, had them but she wouldn't supply Thomas with an address to contact him.[9] Harold was living in Canada by then.[10] Might Harold have parted with any? Could some be in Canada? And when were the notebooks returned to Jessie that Phyllis sold later? By contradiction Looker claims that Jefferies' sister Sarah Billing had some of the notebooks and that she wouldn't let Thomas see the notebooks.[11]

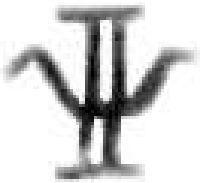
Hopefully the lost notebooks are in someone's careful ownership. Any information would be most welcome.

~~~

In the 1990s Phyllis Treitel spent many months copying the contents of the notebooks at the British Library by hand. Lady Treitel was far better at reading Jefferies' handwriting than Looker who was also very selective in what he chose to include in his book.[12] Lady Treitel's transcripts were donated to the Richard Jefferies Society in March 2020 by her sons. These have now been typed up and the electronic document (it is not available in print at the time of writing) also includes images of Jefferies' illustrations. This large document can be downloaded from the Richard Jefferies' blog.[13]

.

~~~



An interesting symbol appears regularly in Jefferies' last two notebooks that Samuel Looker interpreted as meaning 'Lyra's Prayer'[12]. The symbol appears whenever Jefferies wants to note his feeling of ecstasy, for example: the overwhelming emotion he experienced when gazing at the

[8] *Richard Jefferies: His Life and Works*, Edward Thomas (London: Hutchinson, 1909)

[9] In his introduction to *The Chronicles of the Hedges* (London: Phoenix House, 1948) p.13 Looker quotes from a letter from Edward Thomas to Dr. Rake.

[10] On 14 April 1905, aged 30, Harold Jefferies arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada sailing from Liverpool.

[11] *Richard Jefferies Man of the Fields* by S.J. Looker and Crichton Porteous (London: John Baker, 1964), p.xi.

[12] *The Nature Diaries and Note-Books of Richard Jefferies* edited by Samuel J. Looker (London: The Grey Walls Press Ltd., 1948).

[13] RJ Notebooks -Treitel and Saunders.pdf

sculpture of the Venus Accroupie or his feelings of elation on Liddington Hill. The figure looks like a combination of the Orion and Lyra constellations, as well as the lyre, a figure with arms raised and the palms turned upwards or it could embrace the Greek capital 'ps' (ψ) super-imposed as in the Greek word *psyche* (ψυχή) or soul.

Jefferies referred to his 'Lyra's Prayer' in chapter two of *The Story of My Heart*:

> One evening, when the bright white star in Lyra was shining almost at the zenith over me, and the deep concave was the more profound in the dusk, I formulated it into three divisions. First, I desired that I might do or find something to exalt the soul, something to enable it to live its own life, a more powerful existence now. Secondly, I desired to be able to do something for the flesh, to make a discovery or perfect a method by which the fleshly body might enjoy more pleasure, longer life, and suffer less pain. Thirdly, to construct a more flexible engine with which to carry into execution the design of the will. I called this the Lyra prayer, to distinguish it from the far deeper emotion in which the soul was alone concerned.

In the context of when the symbol was used, it seemed to indicate the 'far deeper emotion in which the soul alone was concerned.'

~~~
~~~