Richard Jefferies, Freethinker

Royston Pike

Royston Pike (1869–1980) was the author of many books on social history and religion and a regular contributor to *The Humanist* and *The American Rationalist*. In this essay published in *The American Rationalist* July 1957, Pike, quoting from *The Story of My Heart*, attests that Jefferies 'showed himself as an unbeliever in the God of the Churches and Creeds.'

Pike was at one time chairman of Esher Council and in the 1960s introduced the Royston Pike Lectures which continue today among several Surrey organisations.

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When my dog takes me for a walk—and he sees to it that that's pretty often—I can hardly help following the footsteps of Richard Jefferies, since he passed several of his all too few years in this part of Surrey on the fringe of London and made it very much of his own.

That was some eighty years ago, and you can imagine that there have been many changes since his day. What were little villages have become towns. Fields have been swallowed up in the tide of bricks and mortar. Footpaths and lanes that he strolled along in the course of his rambles are now speed-tracks. The horses that plodded through the dust have given place to what we on this side of the Atlantic insist on calling motor-cars.

All the same, there are still quite a number of things to be seen that Jefferies saw—the trees and the hedges, the paths across the commons, the cottages and barns, the unending struggle with the seasons that leaves its mark on man and beast. The birds are here still, the butterflies in their brief existence, the overhanging sky now bright with the sun's rays, now lowering with the clouds of storm.

Jefferies might be described as the English Thoreau; the latter's picture of himself as 'a mystic, a transcendentalist, and a natural philosopher to boot,' might be transferred to the man who was born within a year of Thoreau's leaving Walden Pond. Descended from good old English country folk, Jefferies was born on a farm near Swindon, in Wilshire, and as a youth he got employment on a local newspaper and wrote several novels which are best forgotten. Then in 1877, when he was in his 29th year and not long married, he and his wife moved to the London suburb of Surbiton, a mile or two from where I live, where he developed into a writer of books and articles on the life of the country, human and animal, the life of plant and tree, hedge and ditch and stream. Some of his early books are still read; indeed, the name of Richard

Jefferies comes very near the top in the list of 'nature writers'. But the book by which he is best remembered is his attempt at writing an autobiography of a very intimate and special kind. *The Story of My Heart* was published in 1883, only four years before his death, and it has been printed again and again since. Although called an autobiography, it is not one in the ordinary sense of the world. It tells nothing of his birth or upbringing, his schooldays or first ventures into the world, his marriage or his children. None of these are mentioned in its pages; rather, it is the story of the adventures of a freethinker in search of a deeper, richer, vaster, and intenser experience than life usually gives, than life perhaps can give.

Jefferies was no fine muscular figure of a man; he was tall and spare and stooping, and he died before he was forty of consumption, the disease that killed Thoreau also. But he had a passion for life and living as few men can have had. He looked upon asceticism as the vilest blasphemy, while "to see a perfect human body unveiled causes a sense of worship." He spoke ecstatically of the "divine beauty of flesh," and though there is no reason to suppose that he strayed very far from the strict path of Victorian morality, he declared that he would like "to be loved by every beautiful woman on earth, from the swart Nubian to the white and divine Greek."

Such a confession must have shocked many of his readers and scared many more away. But there was worse to come, much worse. In page after page of excited prose that came near to poetry he showed himself to be an unbeliever in the God of the Churches and Creeds, a denier of purpose in the universe, a doubter of any form of future life other than in human memories. He prayed—but "'by prayer I do not mean a request for anything preferred to a deity; I mean intense soul-emotion, intense aspiration." There is no god in nature, he maintains, either in the clods of earth or in the composition of the stars; it is useless, therefore, to seek to trace any marks of divine handiwork. Everything in human affairs happens by chance; if it were otherwise, it would be fatuous to believe in a deity who should be responsible for much of what occurs. All the same, Jefferies holds that there is an existence that is higher, better, more perfect than deity. "'Earnestly I pray to find this something better than a god. There is something superior, higher, more good. For this I search, labour, think and pray. If after all there be nothing, and my soul has to go out like a flame, yet even then I have thought this while it lives. With the whole force of my existence, with the whole force of my thought, mind, and soul, I pray to find this Highest Soul, this greater than deity, this better than god."

High up in the hills, lying on the grass of an ancient cape within sight of the sea, he dreamed and longed after a life that should be vastly superior to the confined existence that he had known, that had been filled with petty cares, spoiled by unsatisfied longings and disappointed hopes. "Give me the deepest soul-life."'

Although he had expressed the wish, “let my ashes be scattered abroad—not collected in an urn—freely sown wide and broadcast,"' when he died he was laid to rest in a village cemetery near Worthing on the south coast of England. Some little time ago I went to see his grave. There is a cross at the head—although the story that he was reconciled to traditional Christianity is false—and on the stone at the foot there is the inscription: “To the honoured memory of the Prose Poet of England's Fields and Woodlands."' All around are the sombre memorials of the generations that are gone, but in the distance rise the Downs, smooth and rounded as a lovely woman's breast. There if anywhere you should seek his spirit.