JESSIE JEFFERIES REVISITED TO COMMEMORATE THE CENTENARY OF HER DEATH ON 12 July 1926

The original essay on which this article is based and titled 'Jessie Jefferies: Lest we Forget' was written by Peter K. Robins and Cyril F. Wright in December 1981. New information has been gathered over the last 45 years and this article has been updated accordingly but should be read in conjunction with Andrew Rossabi's accounts of Jessie in his biography of Richard Jefferies *A Peculiarly English Genius* (in four volumes) and, in particular, Chapter X of Volume II.

For someone who knew Richard Jefferies better than anyone during his short life, remarkably little is known about Jessie Jefferies née Baden, who was his wife; the mother of his three children; adviser and amanuensis in his literary work; nurse in his afflictions. She is little mentioned in the biographies, and much of her life in the forty years after Richard's death, is a mystery.

Jessie Baden, the eldest of five children born to Andrew Baden (1795−1864) and his second wife Emma (née Smart) was born at Day House Farm by the Coate Reservoir on 2 February 1853. She was baptised at the Holy Cross church, Chiseldon, on 5 May 1853.

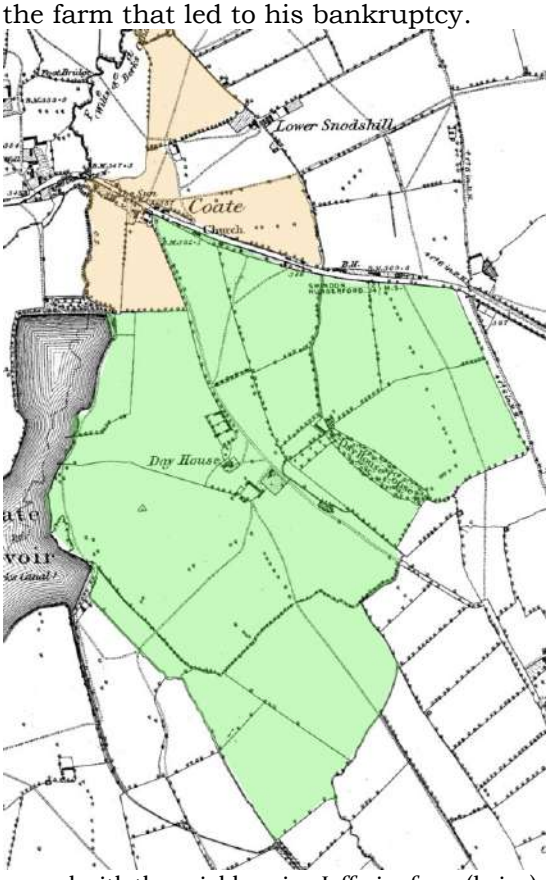
Jessie's mother was once a servant at Day House Farm (1951 census). Emma Smart was born in Liddington on 12 March 1824 and married Andrew on 25 October 1851—one year after his first wife (Jane née Choules died 19 October 1850). The announcement in the local paper rep0rted that Jane died 'after a long and painful illness, borne with Christian fortitude, and a realisation of the great truth that "Christ is all in all".' Jane and Andrew had nine children, the oldest of which was born in 1818 (Emma Jane was baptised on 11 Sep 1818. She is recoded on censuses as deaf and dumb and a pair of her baby shoes are preserved at the Richard Jefferies Museum); three children were older than Andrew's second wife, Emma died 10 November 1873—just 9 months before Jessie married Richard Jefferies.

Jessie grew up in a deeply religious household with many older half-siblings and then four more siblings in a substantial and imposing farmhouse. The house replaced a thatched one on an adjacent site that burnt down. Day House is about a ten minutes walk from the birthplace of Richard Jefferies and the shady Day House Lane continues to Badbury and Liddington Hill.



Day House Farm, painting in oils by Kate Tryon c.1912

Andrew Baden was a tenant-farmer, with 'nearly 300 acres—all excellent meadow land".[1] The Baden family was well-known in north and central Wiltshire; a branch owned manorial property at Enford, near Pewsey. James Luckett Jefferies, Richard's father, on the other hand farmed under forty acres but was eventually the owner of his little homestead, albeit encumbered by legal obligations when he inherited the farm that led to his bankruptcy.



Extent of Day House Farm (green) compared with the neighbouring Jefferies farm (beige). Derived from Chiseldon tithe map and apportionment (1844-5), plotted on Ordnance Survey 6-inch scale map surveyed in 1878.

It was around 1870 that Richard's affections turned to Jessie. In a letter to his Aunt Ellen, dated 8 November 1870, he wrote 'Miss Baden is the daughter of the largest farmer in the neighbourhood & has received a very superior education, in fact I think she is a young lady whom you would be pleased to see Sarah (Richard's sister) associate with.'

Richard and his siblings seem to have been friendly with Jessie's own sisters and brother, but perhaps not the middle-aged half-brother, Thomas Jenner Baden. Richard brought a charge of assault for a cowardly and uncalled-for attack on himself by on 7 October 1871.[2] Richard had asked him for an apology for what Baden had written in a letter about the character of a lady (unknown, but possibly Mary Rawlings). Whatever the precise reason for Baden knocking Richard to the ground and drawing blood is unclear but the inference was that Richard was the father of Mary Rawlings' illegitimate child (born in December 1866) who someone claimed looked like Richard Jefferies. However Richard and Jessie were engaged in August 1871 just two months before the incident and it might have been a spiteful attempt to blacken Richard in the eyes of Jessie. At this time Jessie had taken up a position helping at Spencer House School, Northampton, that her half-sister Elizabeth had established.

But undeterred, Richard and Jessie were married at Holy Cross church (Chiseldon) on 8 July 1874. Jessie was 21, and her husband 25. The wedding certificate was witnessed by Henry James Jefferies & Sarah Jefferies (Richard's brother and sister).

[1] Letter from James Luckett Jefferies to Dr. Rake (26.11.1896).

[2] See Richard Jefferies Society's 'Talks and Articles Library', No.164. For a more detailed account see *A Peculiarly English Genius* Vol II, pp.232–237, by Andrew Rossabi,.

CERTIFIED COPY OF AN ENTRY OF MARRIAGE GIVEN AT THE GENERAL REGISTER OFFICE

Application Number PAS2073674

1874. Marriage solemnized at the Parish Church in the Parish of Chiswick in the County of Middlesex

No.	When Married	Name and Surname	Age	Condition	Rank or Profession	Residence at the time of Marriage	Father's Name and Surname	Rank or Profession of Father
277	July 8th	John Richard Jefferies	25	Bachelor	Reporter & Author	Chiswick	James Jefferies	Farmer
		Jessie Baden	21	Spinster	Jersey	St Giles Battersea	Andrew Baden	Farmer

Married in the Parish Church according to the Rites and Ceremonies of the Established Church, by ____ or after Banns by me, Thos Bethell Vicar

This Marriage was solemnized between us, John Richard Jefferies, Jessie Baden — in the Presence of us, Henry James Jefferies, Sarah Jefferies

A studio portrait of Jessie, taken in Swindon in the same year shows her with a plait over the back of her head, and with a gentle, placid countenance.



They lived first with his parents in the farmhouse at Coate, and moved in 1875 to 22 Victoria Street (now Victoria Road) in Swindon Old Town, close to the offices of the *North Wilts Herald*, on the staff of which Richard was employed. In the unpretentious, though quite roomy, stone house, one of a continuous row, their son Harold was born there on 3 May 1875 and baptised at Christ Church on 30 June.

Richard's ambitions and modest success decided him to leave the sleepy Wiltshire town to try his fortunes nearer to London. Jessie must even then have begun to foresee what her marriage to a budding writer might entail for her. His long absences from time to time, when he made the home of his Aunt Ellen in Sydenham a base for house-hunting from, at least April 1876, and for contacting editors and publishers, was followed by the move early in 1877 to a plain-looking house on the busy Ewell Road, at Surbiton (2 Woodside Terrace).



Here their second child, Jessie Phyllis was born on 6 December 1880, and Harold went to a private kindergarten. The choice of school was just one indication that however modest the income from the current flow of new books, certain standards had to be maintained, Jessie must often have been hard-pressed to ensure the silence in working hours and at mealtimes that her husband enjoined; so that perhaps his long, lone, regular walks into the Surrey countryside offered some relief to herself and the children.[3]

Because of a serious decline in Richard's health, they moved in 1882 to Brighton. During periods of temporary recovery he made a visit to Exmoor and another to Paris. While he was in Paris, Jessie experienced the strange illusion of seeing her husband walk up to the front door, though at that time, it appears that he had no plans for his return. Their son Richard Oliver Launcelot was born on 18 July 1883.

At Eltham in 1885, after a further move, they suffered the terrible shock of the death of their baby from meningitis. In what was then a semi-rural Kent township, Richard and Jessie became closely acquainted with a lady and gentleman who visited them often, and endeavoured to apply Christian consolation to ease Richard's seemingly troubled spirit. After his death, Jessie wrote to this lady assuring her that he had finally committed himself to Christ. Jessie's simple Christian faith stood firm against Richard's growing agnosticism, and the controversy that raged in the columns of the *Pall Mall Gazette,* after his death, must greatly have distressed her.[4]



In the last months at Goring-by-Sea ('Sea View', later renamed 'Jefferies House'), when Jefferies was too much weakened by illness to guide a pen, Jessie patiently took down his dictation. S.M. Wiens' scene in the sunlit arbour within the garden, with the sick man resting on a chair—bedstead, and Jessie, pen in hand on a stool by his side, is a unique and beautifully imagined painting.[5]



[3] Worthing Cavalcade . "Richard Jefferies. My Father." by Richard Harold Jefferies. 1944, p.22.
[4] *Pall Mall Gazette*, 3 October 1891.
[5] Reproduced in Worthing Cavalcade 1944.



By 1886 their poverty was such that Richard reluctantly accepted a grant of £100 from The Royal Literary Fund. The closing weeks of his life were unutterably sad. Jessie's only help was a strong, buxom village girl, named Jennie Moss. Their friend and confidant, the artist J.W. North visited them at Goring in the early summer of 1887. It is only too painfully evident of the writer's rapid decline, that on the afternoon of Sunday August 14th, Mr. North, expecting once more to speak with him, found him lying twelve hours dead.

"All through the last days," he records, "his wife was with him day and night, a young country girl who behaved nobly all through."[6] Jessie was then 34 years old. Richard was buried in the Broadwater Cemetery near Worthing.

A fund for his widow was started by the *Pall Mall Gazette*, one of the journals to which he had contributed. Combined with the proceeds of a local fund at Salisbury, and another raised by the *Manchester Guardian*, it reached £1730. Among the subscribers were H. Rider Haggard, Walter Besant and The Marquis of Salisbury. Besant wrote *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies* in 1888, with Jessie's help and approval, with the object of raising a further sum. In 1887, a question was raised in Parliament about Jefferies widow, and the Civil List; and later that year, a pension was granted by the Government.

Jessie Jefferies had been a devoted wife and mother, and had been helpful in selecting suitable titles for some of her husband's books. The previously unpublished essays issued under the title *Field and Hedgerow* in 1889, were her own selection. Only a few of Jefferies' books bear dedications. His novel *Greene Ferne Farm* was dedicated – "To Jessie;" and *Bevis* to Jessie, Harold and Phyllis. There is a well composed photograph of Jessie, described as "the last portrait," which may well have been taken in her early 30's to please Richard.



It is a beautiful face, wearing an air of quiet composure. Her daughter long afterwards recalled that her mother was a self-effacing, gentle, amiable person. She was a strongly-built woman, and her son and daughter took after her. She said that it was quite wrong to suppose that Richard had deliberately presented himself as a misanthropic invalid.

Jessie was immortalised as Felise in *The Dewy Morn.* She was also the model for the beautiful and intelligent noblewoman, Aurora in *After London*; and possibly for Margaret Estcourt in *Greene Ferne Farm.* The church in the opening chapter of this book is based on Chiseldon, where Jessie and Richard were married.

Jessie's life after her husband's passing, may be followed, often uncertainly, from disjointed fragments of information and conjecture. Sometimes the widows of great men live publicly in their husband's reflected reputation, but this was not so with Jessie Jefferies. Phyllis was sent at first to stay with her Aunt Sally (Sarah Billing, Richard's sister,) while Jessie and Harold then 12 years old, accepted the invitation of J.W. North to stay with him and his wife at Beggarnhuish House on the Brendon Hills, near Washford in Somerset, a district that Richard had visited in 1882. It was here that Harold enjoyed watching the freight trains of the West Somerset Mineral Railway coming down from the iron mines to Watchet.[7]

Harold was enrolled at Dulwich College in January 1889 finishing his studies in December 1891 whilst Phyllis started at James Allen's girl school on 11 May 1889 and left in April 1892. Phyllis was finally baptised at Saint John the Evangelist church in East Dulwich on Saturday 24 August 1889. Their address was 3 Townley Park Villas, Lordship Lane, Dulwich Rise. From there they moved to 158 Avenue Road, Mill Hill Park, Acton. *The Toilers of the Field* was published by Longmans in 1892 and Jessie had given Phyllis an inscribed copy with the Acton address.

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[6] *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies.* Walter Besant. Ch. XII.

[7] Worthing Cavalcade 1944. p. 27. Also see Richard Jefferies Society: Talks and Articles No. 40 "J.W. North, his associations with Richard Jefferies and his family," by Berta Lawrence.

Richard's mother died on 21 July 1895 only to be followed by his father eighteen months later on 24 December 1896. James Luckett Jefferies did leave a will, dated 30 July 1895. Probate was given as £154 and his assets, after expenses deducted, were to be divided equally to his children Charles, Sarah and Henry (in the USA). Leaving nothing to his son Richard's family does suggest that Jessie might not have kept in touch with her parents-in-law either and that she was deliberately excluded.

By 1901, there was another of the many moves—this time to Clarence House, 257 Chesterfield Road, Ashford. Harold emigrated to Canada and arrived in Nova Scotia on 14 April 1905 after spending nearly three years working for his uncle Robert Billing as a proof-reader and, before that, he was at sea as a midshipman.

On Thursday, 18 April 1901 Jessie and Phyllis met Thomas Mosher (the American publisher) and his wife in London.[8] Jessie remembers the occasion in her letter to Mosher dated 4 January 1902 written to thank him for sending her some sets of his Jefferies' publications: 'What pleasure it would have given my Husband could he have foreseen his work would have been admired & appreciated in your country… Phyllis & I often talk of the pleasant time we spent with Mrs. Mosher & yourself in London…[9] This meeting led to Jessie parting with an autographed manuscript of Jefferies' poem 'My Chaffinch' for £5 that her son-in-law Robert Billing negotiated and organised.[10]

The next move, after Harold emigrated to Canada, was to Oakleigh, Chiddingfold, Surrey. Chiddingfold is just eleven miles from Guildford where Jessie's brother- and sister-in-laws, Charles Jefferies and Sarah Billing, lived with their families.

By 1916 Phyllis and Jessie were living in Perranporth, Cornwall. Phyllis married Alfred Hargrave on 24 April 1916 in St. Piran's church, Perranzabuloe. It seems that the newly-weds lived with Jessie at Glen Cottage, until they built Overdale at Cox, just down the road and where they all moved. This was confirmed by the 1921 census.

Alan Herrick, the son of Jessie's sister Alice, recalls staying with Aunt Jessie at Bearley, Warwickshire around 1915–16. This might well be the case as Alfred Hargrave owned a property at Bearley that is mentioned in an article in the *Midland Daily Telegraph* dated 18 December 1924. This reported that Alfred's sister, Caroline Susan Hargrave, had died at Ingleside, 11 Willes Terrace, Leamington on 27 October 1924. She left the bulk of her property to Alfred and Phyllis. Net probate was put at £5,459 16s 9d. So for some reason Jessie and, presumably, Phyllis were staying with Alfred Hargrave just before they moved to Cornwall.



Samuel Looker, who in later years was entertained at Overdale by Phyllis, remembers the sloping garden leading down to an orchard, and a row of elms which bounded the garden foot. Today its walls are partly festooned with climbing plants, and it nestles half-hidden from the lane by a high bank crowned with fern. In the pleasant sitting-room, Looker sat at the inkstained table on which Richard had written many of his essays, and which eventually found its way to the Richard Jefferies Museum at Coate, through the courtesy of Miss Christine Billing, Jessie's niece.

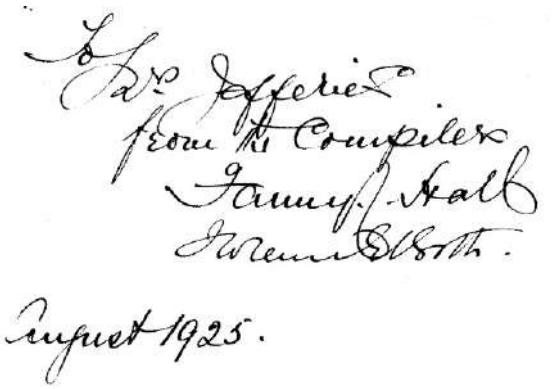
Mrs. Nellie Mayes, the writer, who lives in Perranporth, finds that many of the older people remember Phyllis, though her mother seems to be a shadowy figure. One of the local characters, Bobby Mitchell, remembered them as 'ladies,' who bought his butter and eggs. An old lady recollects her father telling her that he went to do some gardening for Mrs. Jefferies, but she was out, and she had left sixpence for him on the water-butt.

Jessie' final home was Penlu in Perranporth, the address given in The Jefferies Family Tree 1686–1925, published privately by Fanny Hall and Florence Bott in 1925 who inscribed Jessie's copy of the pamphlet as follows:

[8] 'Richard Jefferies launches an American Collector's Passion' by Philip R. Bishop, *Richard Jefferies Society Journal* No.33 (2018), p.134. See also 'Finding Work for Harold Jefferies' by the editors in the same edition, p.139–140.

[9] Jessie's letters are in the archives of Houghton Library, MS Am 1096-753.

[10] Billing had advertised the MS available to the public in a front page advertisement placed in *The Athenaeum*, 17 Nov 1900.



THE JEFFERIES FAMILY TREE

Mrs. Mayes finds Penlu to be a solidly-built house of grey stone, now divided into two villas.

Jessie died on July 12th 1926 at the age of 73, and was buried on July 16th. in the cemetery of the Church of St. Piran, Perranzabuloe. Her death passed un-noticed in the main Cornish newspapers. The *Wilts and Gloucester Standard* of Cirencester, paid tribute to her in a paragraph headed "A Devoted Life." (July 24th 1926.) Her grave became overgrown with a thicket of bushes and brambles and remained completely buried until 2018.



With the help of Bryan Jones, Jennifer Carpenter and a local gardener the grave was uncovered on 5 October 2018.

After the death of Mr. Hargrave, Phyllis moved to Seaford, where her cousins Christine and Helen Billing lived. She died there on November 28th 1958. Harold worked for a time with his Uncle Billing, who was a printer at Guildford, then went to sea, married and settled in Canada, where his descendants reside. One of his eight children Christine Ellen Cecilia (Mrs. Mavis Chase) of Nanaimo, B.C., related that when the news of her birth was received by her grandmother in England in 1911, Jessie was listening to a songthrush in the garden, and asked that the little girl be henceforth known as Mavis. Mrs. Chase remembers having gifts sent over by her grandmother, and understands that in later life she was confined to a wheelchair. Harold died in 1942. His son and grandson, both named Richard Harold, represent the direct male line from Richard and Jessie Jefferies.

It is hoped that the foregoing tribute, however incomplete, adds something new to the portrait of Jessie Jefferies, whose encouragement and influence upon one of England's most outstanding country writers, in those thirteen precious years of marriage, have been all too little regarded.



Jessie (Baden) Jefferies March 1879