

Richard Jefferies: A Biographical note

Richard Jefferies was born on 6 November 1848 at Coate near Swindon in North Wiltshire, son of a small, struggling dairy farmer. His grandfather owned the chief mill and bakery in Swindon. Generations of Jefferies had been farmers in the isolated upland parish of Draycot Foliat on Chiseldon Plain since the 1660s. The mother's side of the family came from Painswick near Stroud and had strong connections with the London printing trade. The author's paternal and maternal grandfathers both worked for Richard Taylor of Red Lion Court off Fleet Street, a leading printer of scientific and natural history works. Between the ages of four and nine the boy was sent to live at Shanklin Villa, the Sydenham home of his Aunt Ellen and Uncle Thomas. Thomas Harrild was a letterpress printer with premises in Shoe Lane.

In 1866, after an irregular education, Jefferies joined the staff of the *North Wilts Herald*, a new Tory newspaper based in Swindon. He worked chiefly as a reporter but also published his first tales and short stories in its pages, as well as two local histories, of Malmesbury and of Swindon and its environs. He first came into wider prominence in 1872, year of the formation of the National Agricultural Labourers' Union under Joseph Arch, with three long letters on the condition of the Wiltshire labourer published in the columns of *The Times*. The letters attracted much attention and comment. During the mid-1870s Jefferies contributed articles on farming topics to such prestigious magazines as *Fraser's* and the *New Quarterly*. However, his chief ambition was to make his name as a writer of fiction and he published three novels (*The Scarlet Shawl* (1874), *Restless Human Hearts* (1875), and *World's End* (1877)) under the imprint of Tinsley Brothers, a frankly commercial and somewhat disreputable firm which had published Thomas Hardy's first three novels.

In 1877 Jefferies, now married to Jessie Baden, the daughter of a neighbouring farmer, and father of a small boy, moved to Tolworth near Surbiton to be closer to his Fleet Street editors while retaining a foothold in the country that was increasingly the source of his literary inspiration. The severance from his native county acted as a Proustian trigger, and on 4 January 1878 in the *Pall Mall Gazette* appeared the first of a series of 24 articles under the title "The Gamekeeper at Home", based on memories of Wiltshire and of "Benny" Haylock, keeper on the Burderop estate near Coate. The series attracted the attention of George Smith of Smith, Elder & Co, who published *The Gamekeeper at Home* in volume form in June. The book was widely and glowingly reviewed and ran through several editions. Jefferies followed it with others in a similar vein, *Wild Life in a Southern County* (1879), *The Amateur Poacher* (1879), *Hodge and His Masters* (1880), and *Round About a Great Estate* (1880), which the *Scrutiny* critic Q.D. Leavis called "one of the most delightful books in the English language". These works established Jefferies as the foremost natural history and country

writer of his day. While living in Surbiton he also published a slight but charming pastoral novel, *Greene Ferne Farm* (1880); two children's books which have become classics, *Wood Magic* (1881) and *Bevis* (1882); and wrote the essays later collected under the title *Nature Near London*, about the remarkable variety and richness of wild life to be found in relatively close proximity to the capital.

Jefferies' health had never been strong and in December 1881 he fell ill of a fistula, probably tubercular in origin. He underwent four painful operations and the following year moved to West Brighton in the hope that the sea air would improve his health. Illness, coupled with the presence of the sea, which always held a powerful fascination for him, and the rediscovery of a chalk grassland landscape like that of his native Wiltshire, spurred him to write an autobiography of his inner life, a book about which he told the publisher C. J. Longman he had been meditating seventeen years. It was called *The Story of My Heart* and was a record of his mystical experiences from the time when, at the age of eighteen, 'an inner and esoteric meaning' had begun to come to him 'from all the visible universe'. The book was a failure on publication (in 1883), but is regarded as the cornerstone of his work and a classic of English nature mysticism. William James in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* called it "Jefferies' wonderful mystic rhapsody".

His last four years were a heroic struggle against what Jefferies called the giants of Disease, Poverty and Despair, but he never ceased to write and dictated to his wife when he was too weak to hold a pen. During these years he produced much of his best work: the novels *The Dewy Morn* (1884), which Mrs Leavis described as 'one of the few real novels between *Wuthering Heights* and *Sons and Lovers*', *After London* (1885), which was greatly admired by William Morris, and *Amaryllis at the Fair* (1887), to make room for which on his shelf the critic Edward Garnett said he would turn out several highly-regarded novels by Thomas Hardy; and the essay collections *The Life of the Fields* (1884), *The Open Air* (1885) and *Field and Hedgerow* (1889), the last of which was edited by his widow and published posthumously. Of the later essays Jefferies' biographer Edward Thomas well said that 'both in their mingling of reflection and description, and in their abundant play of emotion, they stand by themselves and enlarge the boundaries of this typical form of English prose'. Aptly, one of Jefferies' last pieces was an introduction to a new edition of Gilbert White's *The Natural History of Selborne*. He died on 14 August 1887 at Goring-by-Sea, of tuberculosis and exhaustion, and was buried in Broadwater Cemetery, Worthing.