

Transcript of Christine Billing's address on the opening of the Richard Jefferies Museum at Coate

June 24, 1960

I¹ cannot tell you much about my Uncle Richard² [I did not know] him but I have some vivid memories of the family that once lived in this house. And I do remember most distinctly the day of Uncle Richard's funeral.³ To my great surprise I found my mother⁴ crying, & soon afterwards she went away in a black dress after telling my sister & me to take care of little Phyllis⁵, who had just come to stay with us. Little Phyllis was wearing a black dress too, her fair hair was flying about her shoulders & there was a very rueful expression on her round face. I was only a puny little child & I felt something was very wrong, so I sat down on the nursery floor & howled. That did have the good effect of giving the other two, who were a little older, the amusement of bullying me. Helen,⁶ always a person of resource, brought out the wooden horse on wheels, which was one of our great treasures, lifted Phyllis on to it & pushed her towards me with great vigour. Nearer and nearer they came, both looking so vindictive that I was frightened & howled louder. So the game became really amusing. It was a long time before I got my own back, but little Phyllis & I were soon great friends. As young girls we had some splendid holidays in Cornwall, climbing over rocks, scaling cliffs & doing many things that would have horrified our parents had they known anything about it. Phyllis was a good companion – sometimes a really charming one – with an adventurous spirit & a boyish sense of fun, caught partly from her tall brother Harold.⁷ But, like her father, she had a difficult side to her nature & she would have gloomy moods in which nothing seemed to interest her. As years went on these moods became more frequent. She had side times nursing her mother & her husband unto their deaths & then came years of loneliness after both had gone. After some time we persuaded her to live near us, but I never felt that she was as much at home in Sussex as in Cornwall. Another blow was the death of her brother Harold, for though he lived in Canada they understood one another & corresponded regularly. Then, only six months before her end, when she was obviously beginning to go down the hill, there came the shock of my dear sister's sudden death. That was a blow to the family as well as to me, for Helen was one on whom the family depended. When things went wrong Helen was always asked to help & she would pack up & go without hesitation. She was a Jefferies in her love of beauty & of the joy of out-door life, but she was practical, clear-sighted, business-like & capable & helpful to all in trouble (she had no sympathy with idle

¹ Christine Emily Billing (born 24 December 1881; died 1967) – Richard Jefferies' niece.

² (John) Richard Jefferies (born 6 November 1848 at Coate; died 14 August 1887 at Goring, Sussex)

³ Richard Jefferies was buried at Broadwater cemetery on 20 August 1887.

⁴ Sarah (Jefferies) Billing [born 2 July 1853 at Coate; died 16 November 1913 aged 60. Married on 10 June 1875 to Robert Thomas Billing [born Sep 1849 in Guildford; died 1942 aged 93] – Richard Jefferies' sister.

⁵ (Jessie) Phyllis Jefferies (born 6 December 1880 in Surbiton; died 28 November 1958 in Seaford. Married Alfred Hargrave of Leamington on 24 April 1916) – Richard Jefferies' daughter.

⁶ Helen Elizabeth Billing (born 22 Jan 1878; died 1958)

⁷ (Richard) Harold Jefferies (born 1875, Swindon; died 3 November 1942, Lachine, Canada) – Richard Jefferies' son.

dreamers or with any kind of sentimentality). In some ways she took the place filled by Aunt Ellen⁸ in an earlier generation. Aunt Ellen was our Grandmamma Jefferies⁹ sister & she married a Mr Thos. Harrild,¹⁰ who was related to my Grandfather [Joseph] Billing, so she was a well-known figure to both sides of the family. Aunt Ellen had no children of her own & when money was short in Wiltshire she often had one of her sister's children with her. She was a conventional Victorian lady, shocked by anything unorthodox, & yet she showed amazing understanding of young Richard Jefferies. She realised that he was a boy of unusual talent, & encouraged his ambition & urged him on, when the rest of the family would have kept him back. Her most frequent visitor was my mother "little Sarah" or "Sally" in this house, later on "Aunt Lily" to all the nieces and nephews; & for some years before her marriage my mother lived at Sydenham [Now Sydenham is not the neighbourhood to appeal to a country-lover, but "Shanklin Villa" had its attractions. In the front garden were the two Monkey Puzzles, one on each side of the door – tall & symmetrical & excitingly prickly to young fingers – & in the back garden was a fountain with gold fish, and a croquet lawn & a tall pine tree & a walnut tree & a distant peep at the Crystal palace. I can remember Aunt Ellen well & am reminded of her by a sampler worked by her at the age of eight years, which I should like to see on these walls if you would accept it. It is a sober-looking sampler but quite appropriate, for she was a sober lady & a very diligent one (I cannot tell the number of beautifully made shawls she left behind). The inscription says "Ellen Gyde finished this, June 4th 1833". Then I have also a little painting of my Grandmother Jefferies by her niece Margaret Gyde,¹¹ who was a musician & artist, & if you have room for them, I hope to pass these two to the Museum later.] I remember Aunt Ellen well, & far better than my Grandmother Jefferies but I remember my Grandfather¹² very distinctly. After the farm was given up they went to end their days in Bath & once my Mother took me with her to stay with them. Grandpa Jefferies met us at the railway station & I forgot my manners & stood staring up into his face, because I had never seen such blue eyes. With his white hair & his white beard & his shaggy eyebrows they showed up like pieces of the blue sky. I knew we should be friends & so we were. He used to take me for walks in the Victoria Park & tell me the names of flowers & birds & I used to chatter away as to someone of my own age (I was about 6 then). I never went to Bath again, though Mother visited them regularly. Soon after this Grandma had the stroke which deprived her of speech & movement, & her death was a merciful release. Then for the second time I saw my Mother cry, & it surprised me, for she was not the crying sort. She had a gay & gallant spirit (which she transmitted to my sister). I stood by her through years of weakness & ill-health & heard no lamentations or complaints. My most vivid recollection of her is seeing her sitting up in bed (as she had been told not to do) the day after one of her bad heart-attacks (each one of which was almost like death) greeting the doctor with shining eyes & a smiling face & saying "Doctor, I'm ever so much better. May I get up?" And the doctor turned away & his voice was choky when he

⁸ Ellen (Gyde) Harrild (born 24 Aug 1825 Islington; died 24 Aug 1911, Sydenham) – Richard Jefferies' aunt.

⁹ Elizabeth "Betsy" (Gyde) Jefferies (born 1817; died 21 July 1895 Bath) – Richard Jefferies' mother.

¹⁰ Thomas Harrild (1822-6 Dec 1867) – Richard Jefferies' uncle.

¹¹ Margaret Esther Gyde (b 1863 Islington) daughter of Francis Gyde & Richard Jefferies' cousin.

¹² James Luckett Jefferies (Born 8 Dec 1816, Somerstown; Died 23 Dec 1896 Bath) Richard Jefferies' father.

said, "I am sorry Mrs. Billing, but you must stay here until I come again." Such instructions were hard on one of her active temperament, but she died with her spirit unbroken & bore her suffering as her brother Richard had borne his. I have often thought of him when he was too ill to write dictating to his wife the beautiful words which have brought joy to so many people. My mother died in 1913 so she was spared the 1914 war which took its toll of the Jefferies' as of most families. Mrs Herbert's¹³ brother, Charles¹⁴ Jefferies' only son,¹⁵ had reached manhood & life was full of promise for him, but he did not hesitate to give it up. He fought all through those bad years until a fortnight before the Armistice & then was killed, leading his Tank Corps. His name was Richard Jefferies & I feel he was worthy of it. The famous Richard Jefferies, & his forebears, & his wife & family have gone, & the third generation is dying out, but there are vigorous young members of the family growing up in Surrey, in Canada & the USA. (Mrs Herbert has 5 grandchildren, Harold Jefferies has children and grandchildren in Canada, & Henry Jefferies¹⁶ has descendents in America.) As we go on we shall look back to this room for inspiration & we do thank the Swindon Corporation for honouring our Uncle Richard in this way.

¹³ Dorothy (Jefferies) Herbert (born 10 May 1890; died 1975 at Guildford, Surrey) – Richard Jefferies' niece.

¹⁴ Charles Jefferies (born 26 Nov 1858; died January 1934 in Guildford) – Richard Jefferies' brother.

¹⁵ Richard Oliver Jefferies (born 16 Sep 1892; died 29 Sep 1918) – Richard Jefferies' nephew

¹⁶ Henry Jefferies (born 14 June 1852 at Coate; Died 7 September 1920 in Texas) – Richard Jefferies' brother.