

New Humanist Jan 1974

R. J. LUMSDEN

Richard Jefferies Humanist Mystic

Richard Jefferies' main reputation is as a rustic novelist who also published an early piece of 'post cataclysm' science fiction. His own private musings and revolt against Victorian orthodoxy also deserve to be known, for he was unusual even in his form of Humanism.

FEW HUMANISTS make a point of lying on their backs staring at the sky and feeling the great earth speaking to them; but such a man was Richard Jefferies (1848-87), described by the publisher C. J. Longman as 'that man of genius'.

Many have heard of Jefferies but few know anything of him other than as the author of a strange work entitled *The Story of My Heart*.

He was born into a Wiltshire farming family and grew up with an intense love for nature and a thorough acquaintance with the land and agricultural problems. His none too adequate education received at a school in Swindon was later supplemented by wide and serious reading.

At eighteen he secured a post as reporter with the *North Wilts Herald*. In the next six years he wrote several novels and other works but they were published only because he met the costs himself. In 1872 he came before the public eye when *The Times* printed a letter of some 4,000 words in which he stressed the fact that the tenant farmers of his county were giving agricultural workers a fair deal and that they were not as depressed as some were asserting. A considerable correspondence ensued and the topic was mentioned in reputable journals.

Although this incident increased Jefferies' prestige and he began to write articles on agricultural subjects, he still fancied himself as a novelist, and wasted his leisure energies on three useless novels which only saw print at his expense. Even after success in other genres, he occasionally returned to the novel. Two years before his death, Cassells brought out his *After London*, though insisting that three volumes be reduced to one. It tells of an England relapsed into barbarism with roads and fields overgrown and the art of printing lost. In the anarchy prevailing, the Welsh seize the opportunity of invading England only to be confronted by the avenging Irish.

Amaryllis at the Fair published in the year of his death, is generally thought to be his best novel. It is not without charm and contains many biographical touches. Farmer Iden is in many respects his father; it is a portrayal which in no way shames the elder man.

Richard's first successful book was a collection of earlier articles. It appeared in 1878 under the title *The Gamekeeper at Home*. Two years later came *Hodge and His Masters*, a shrewd study of Wiltshire society from labourer to lord. Other works on rural topics followed at roughly yearly intervals, and some of his most beautiful prose was written during the intense sufferings of his last five years.

But it was by his unique account of his developing thought-life and philosophy that the farmer's son secured a place among the immortals. *The Story of My Heart* is a slight work, but it is a record of seventeen years of questing, restless, courageous thought, 'absolutely and unflinchingly true'.

Sometimes as he lay on the turf he would address the sea; whether mentally or aloud is not clear, but he sees it in his mind as 'green at the rim of the card and blue in deeper ocean'. He would yearn for it: strength, its mystery and glory. Addressing the sun, he would desire 'the soul equivalent of its light and brilliance its endurance and unwearied race.'

By earth and sea and sun and sky he would pray but he says the word is a 'rude sign' to the feeling he experiences. He knows no better word.

In fact he has little time for any form of Theism 'A man bathes in a pool, a crocodile seizes and lacerate; his flesh. If anyone maintains that an intelligence directed that cruelty, I can only reply that his mind is under an illusion. A man is caught by a revolving shaft and torn to pieces, limb from limb. There is no directing intelligence in human affairs, no protection and no assistance.'

'How can I adequately express my contempt for the assertion that all things occur for the best, for a wise and beneficent end, and are ordered by a humane intelligence! It is the most utter falsehood and a crime against the human race'.

Intellectual darkness

Good Humanist that he is, he sees no cause for despair in this, but rather hope . . . 'because if the present condition of things were ordered by a superior power, there would be no possibility of improving it for the better in spite of that power. Acknowledging that no such power exists, all things become at once plastic to our will'.

‘It is ourselves who should direct our affairs, protecting ourselves from pain, assisting ourselves, succouring and rendering our lives happy. We must do for ourselves what superstition has hitherto supposed an intelligence to do for us’.

Jefferies is convinced that the ruthless impartiality of natural forces before human frailty proclaims the absence of any beneficent all-powerful Being. ‘For how long, for how many thousand years, must the earth and the sea, and the fire and the air, utter these things and force them upon us before they are admitted in their full significance?’

He cocks a snook at Victorian ideas of the harmful nature of idleness. ‘I deny altogether that idleness is an evil, or that it produces evil; and I am well aware why the interested are so bitter against idleness—namely because it gives time for thought, and if men had time to think, their reign would come to an end. Idleness—that is, the absence of the necessity to work for subsistence—is a great good. I hope succeeding generations will be able to be idle’.

Regarding the notion of life after death, he says bluntly: ‘For grief there is no known consolation. It is useless to fill our hearts with bubbles. A loved one gone is gone, and as to the future—even if there is a future—it is unknown’. He describes inscriptions on tomb-stones as ‘awful instances of the deep intellectual darkness which presses still on the minds of men. The tomb cries aloud to us,’ he continues, ‘to erase our illusions. Strew human life with flowers; save every hour for the sunshine . . . make joy real now to those you love, and help forward the joy of those yet to be born’.

Incidentally, the directness, simplicity and beauty of Jefferies’ prose is truly astounding for the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

This thinker, this mystic, this man of the field and forest is also an aesthete. Though ‘not a picture lover’, he gazes raptly at the beautiful nudes in the National Gallery. ‘The knee in *Daphnis and Chloë* and the breast are like living things; they draw the heart towards them, the heart must love them ... the divine beauty of flesh is life itself to me . . .’ ‘Is anything so lovely as a back?’ he asks, looking at Juno’s wide back and mesial groove in Titian’s *Venus and Adonis*. Finally he declares that he will search the world through for beauty, and cries: ‘O beautiful human Life! Tears come in my eyes as I think of it. So beautiful, so inexpressibly beautiful!’

Another favourite pilgrimage was to the Greek Sculpture Gallery at the British Museum. ‘The form of limb and torso, of bust and neck, gave me a sighing sense of rest’, he writes.

But was he not in a sense something of a meglomaniac, this strange, complex spirit? He who longed so passionately for greatness of soul and perfection of body, cries out: ‘Give me an iron mace that I may crush the savage beast ... I envy Semiramis ... I envy Nero ... I should like to be loved by every beautiful woman on earth, from the swart Nubian to the white and divine Greek!’

Of strength and exertion and energy and desire and love and adoration, he cries: ‘Give me these in greater abundance than was ever known to man ‘or woman!’



Jefferies seemed every whit as appreciative of nature as Wordsworth or Keats. ‘The great sun burning with light; the strong earth, dear earth; the warm sky; the pure air: the thought of the ocean; the inexpressible beauty of all, filled me with a rapture, an ecstasy, an inflatus . . .’

And with all this consuming awareness and intensity of spirit, there is a wide charity. ‘How willingly would I strew the paths of all with flowers; how beautiful a delight to make the world joyous ... I would submit to a severe discipline, and to go without many things cheerfully for the good and happiness of the human race in the future. Each one of us should do something, however small towards that great end’.

It is no surprise to find an acute sensitivity to human suffering which he felt was so great, so endless, so awful that he could scarcely write of it. He could not go into hospitals and face it lest his mind be temporarily overcome.

Jefferies is also an anarchist and rebel, at least as far as ideas are concerned. He insists that we need to cleanse our minds from ‘the deadening influence of tradition. All courses or methods

of human Life have’ hitherto been failures—we must start again untrammelled by concepts which have failed us’.

A recurring theme, specially in the early stages of his spiritual quest, is his clamant desire for more *soul-life*, *soul-energy*, *the soul-nature*. Sometimes he went ‘to a deep narrow valley in the hills, silent

and solitary', the only sound the chirping of sparrows in the wheat nearby. Then his thoughts would range through geological time and he would see 'the tree-ferns, the Lizard-dragon wallowing in sea-foam, and mountainous creatures, twice-elephantine, feeding on land'. He would feel strong with the power of the ages and he would yearn that in his soul he might have the intellectual part of the power — the idea, the thought.

Suddenly he is rejoicing in the present. 'Now, this moment is exceedingly wonderful. Now, this moment, give me all the thought, all the idea, all the soul expressed in the cosmos around me'.

Obviously his concept of *soul* was far removed from that held by contemporary Christians. To him, the soul is 'the mind of the mind. It can build and construct and look beyond and penetrate space, and create. It is the keenest, the sharpest tool possessed by man'.

He sympathises with those who turn aside the instant the *soul* is mentioned. They do so because for them the word still has mediaeval connotations. These must be cast away, but the reality must be recognised and employed, and understanding of it perfected.

To deny the existence of this 'mind of the mind' would be to regress. We must go forward to discover a Fourth Idea, and after that a Fifth and onwards continually.

Elsewhere he says it is the unrecognised *soul-entity* which, though rudely expressed, constitutes the (his) Fourth Idea. (The First Idea being the existence of the soul, in the traditional sense, that is; the Second, the concept of immortality; the Third, the notion of deity.)

Here then is the enigma in the thought-life of this complex, sensitive character. Having deplored the restrictive influences of the first Three Ideas 'conceived by cave-men', and, in common with most Humanists today, rejected them, he posits the Fourth as some great intellectual breakthrough, of which he is the humble exponent.

It is remarkable that an intellect so bold and perceptive and iconoclastic, should have not only retained the concept of Mind as being some separate entity presumably not dependent on the physical brain, but should have become convinced of the existence of this other soul, 'the mind of the mind'.

Footnote: Jefferies died at Goring, Sussex on August 14th, 1887. According to Sir Walter Besant, his earliest biographer, the widow told an artist friend, J. W. North, who called at the house twelve hours after the writer's death that 'their time had been for long spent in prayer together and reading St. Luke'. Besant seems anxious to read into this a return to a youthful faith. It might be that Jefferies was too considerate to his wife to resist her last efforts to comfort him, or, as was most likely, he was just too weak to do so. He was buried at Broadwater. nr. Worthing. Later a bust was installed in Salisbury Cathedral.