

Richard Jefferies: 'Thoughts on the Labour Question'

Graeme Woolaston

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In her chapter on Richard Jefferies in *Thomas Hardy and Rural England* Merryyn Williams cites 'Thoughts on the Labour Question', and in particular its second chapter, 'The Divine Right of Capital', as evidence that 'As the end of his short life approached Jefferies became more and more radical.'¹ In so doing she is following a lead established by H.S. Salt² and Edward Thomas.³ 'Thoughts on the Labour Question' had first been published, drastically edited, in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of 10 November 1891, four years after Jefferies died; because it had been left incomplete among his papers it was reasonable for Salt and Thomas to assume it had been written in his later years. It is clear however from the manuscript of the complete essay that it was in fact written in 1877 or 1878, nearly ten years before Jefferies died and a year before he wrote *Hodge and His Masters*. The traditional account, therefore, of Jefferies's political development, that he progressed from being a Conservative to being a Radical, must be abandoned in favour of something altogether more complex.

The manuscript is among the collection of Jefferies manuscripts originally built up by Samuel Looker and now in the possession of Col. P.L. Bradfer-Lawrence and his sister Mrs. B. E. Gray, who have placed them on indefinite loan to the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. In an unpublished part of the essay Jefferies quotes at some length from an order of the French Government relating to a general election of 14 October 1877, and the essay cannot be dated before then; at the same time Jefferies's detailed quotation from the order suggests that the election was a fairly recent event. The principal evidence for the dating of the manuscript, however, is the handwriting. The Bradfer-Lawrence manuscripts cover all Jefferies's career after 1876, and the development of his writing is clear: it varies considerably till about 1881, and thereafter is fairly consistent. The handwriting in 'Thoughts on the Labour Question' resembles that in five other manuscripts. Most closely it resembles – to the layman it appears identical with – the handwriting in an early version of *Greene Ferne Farm*, of which there are eighty-six pages in the Fitzwilliam. The resemblance is not merely of actual style but extends to such details as the spacing between the lines and the angle at which the lines slope downwards as they cross the page. The publication of *Greene Ferne Farm* in its final version began in April 1879 and the early draft must therefore have been written, at the latest, some time before then.

The handwriting is also virtually identical with that of notes on five sheets of paper headed variously 'N.Q.', 'New Q. Papers' and 'N.Q. Papers'. These notes seem to relate to an undertaking Jefferies made in December 1876 to write some 'Natural History papers' for *The New Quarterly*⁴ since they are all in fact natural history notes; they certainly date from before the publication of *The Gamekeeper at Home* in early 1878, for quite a number of them were used in that book. Like these notes, and like the early version of *Greene Ferne Farm*, 'Thoughts on the Labour Question' is in a small, 'spinster-ish' style of writing, very similar to that of 'The Paradox: Slow Progress of Science'⁵ which is dated 26 December 1876. The same writing is to be found in a manuscript with the title 'A Game for Bicyclists' which, though not dated, is in violet ink, which is never found in the dated manuscripts after 1877. Lastly it is the style of the writing of the essay 'Three Centuries At Home'⁶ which was certainly written before *Wild Life in a Southern County*; most of the material in the essay was worked into Chapter IV of that book, first published in July 1878. This writing is found nowhere else in the Bradfer-Lawrence manuscripts. Even by the end of 1878, when Jefferies drew up twenty-four sheets of notes for *The Amateur Poacher*, putting the date '8th Dec 78' on the first of them, his handwriting had become more rounded and fuller, and sloped much less to the right.

GRAEME WOOLASTON.
Bedford College, London.

¹ Merryn Williams, *Thomas Hardy and Rural England* (London, 1972), 48.

² H.S. Salt, *Richard Jefferies: A Study* (London,

³ Edward Thomas, *Richard Jefferies: His Life and Work* (London, 1909), 296-7.

⁴ See Oswald Crawford, 'Richard Jefferies: Field-Naturalist and Litterateur', *The Idler*, xiv (August 1898-January 1899), 289-301.

⁵ The title is Samuel Looker's. See Samuel J. Looker (Ed), *Beauty is Immortal* (Worthing, 1948), 52-3.

⁶ See Samuel J. Looker (Ed.), *The Old House at Coate* (London, 1948), 135-143.