

THE ARTIST AS REFORMER. The Contribution of Richard Jefferies.

The Birthday Lecture given to The Richard Jefferies Society on November 1st. 1976. by Mr. J. R.L.Anderson, former Asst. Editor, of *The Guardian*, "Writer and Explorer.

Notes by Mrs. Nora Wright, Minutes Secretary of the Society.

Mr. Anderson confessed to being a writer - a scraper of a living. This was not a bad thing, as Jefferies had also been a writer, journalist and scraper of a living. Mr. Anderson felt instinctively the strains under which he wrote. Jefferies died at 38, some ninety years ago, and was a sick man for most of his adult life. The speaker's own achievement at that age was minimal, and that made Jefferies outstanding, though his work was often elusive and maddening. What is he getting at in his countryside descriptions?

Jefferies was immensely written about in the twenty years following his death in 1887. Seventy two different publications in various media. His achievement was very hard to classify. The novels are almost unreadable apart from *Bevis*, and *Amaryllis at the Fair*. He was deeply imbued with poetry, but was not a poet. He was interested in archaeology, and in Natural history based upon acute observation, but was not a main contributor to science. Yet he has interested people for a hundred years.

Where did this elusive trail lead? Mr. Anderson had conceived the idea of making an exploration of Jefferies. There appeared to be a strange thread running through all his work - his newspaper articles, his novels, *The Story of my Heart*. He was trying to reform the world, consciously or not. Reform means the-'re-forming' of things. He was no political - reformer. His contribution was much deeper and more fundamental.

First, Nature- writing, for which he is best known. Richard Jefferies transformed and reformed our vision of the countryside like the early great French Impressionist painters had done in art. Jefferies and they recorded what they saw, for the first time in history. Previously a tree had been portrayed as an arrangement of single leaves; the impression of a tree as a mass had transformed our scene. *Bevis*, lying on the ice could see skaters at half-a-mile distant. This revealed astonishing insight. *Bevis* climbed a large tree, and saw standing sheaves of corn on the stubble, in different colours. There was a sense of a new reformation in striking a match in the darkened hut, while the moon made it light outside.

In *Wild Life in a Southern County*, Jefferies noted the maltese cross inside the wild poppy. How many of us would have realised that? In writing about people living in the natural

world, of his time, Jefferies showed the same brilliant clarity. Edward Thomas misunderstood Jefferies' Letters to *The Times*, on the farm labourers. Jefferies' vision was too sharp, He did not really show men as slaves, but, as workers, not as badly off, with their cottages, pigs, etc. as the town labourer. Mental honesty enabled him to see that many countrymen could not be bothered to better their lives or help their children's education. Yet he wrote savage things about the hard work of the women; of a girl taken out of her cottage for being an unmarried mother. He was always on the side of humanity, but he wanted to be fair. Thomas felt he was not creative, so he misunderstood him. But Jefferies was, in a real sense, creating a new look at life. For example - Boots. Who has noticed that sculptors show bare feet? That Greek and Roman gods walked in sandals. Feet in boots are distorted. In *The Toilers of the Field*, Jefferies talks of boots weighing seven pounds, of heavy gaiters, and coat, trudging over wet fields. In *The Gamekeeper at Home*, he mentions that the gamekeeper had worn no topcoat for thirty years, the woods being as good as a topcoat, especially a fir wood. These kinds of observation had altered Mr. Anderson's vision and re-formed it.

Jefferies was a great one for little things, as for instance his remarks about the jugs and mugs in *Round About a Great Estate*. You seem to know the men who drank from them. A tall vase may touch the eye, but it doesn't touch the heart. He gave magical descriptions of little things, and saw so much beauty in ordinary things. Even in great vases which were used in people's homes. Jefferies teaches us to see the world more fully and truthfully. In *Wild Life* he says that landlords tried to build good cottages, but they didn't furnish them with sheds. Even today one sees ugly corrugated iron sheds, but they are solid receptacles for storage of all the necessary oddments collected in a home. Social reformers should have taken notice of Jefferies in planning their postwar cottages and council houses.

Richard Jefferies was the would-be reformer of our thought. *The Story of my Heart*, is unique in English literature, and it was wonderful of Longman to accept this work and print it. Longman couldn't describe the work for the purpose of his booklist, so he asked the author to write the blurb, which he did in a three-page description beginning - 'This Book is a confession. The Author describes the successive stages of emotion and thought through which he passed, till he arrived at the conclusions which are set forth in the latter part of the volume.'\* The speaker described the emotions he passed through until he came to his later conclusion, after freeing his mind from all previous thought. "The soul is the man, not the clothes that he wears." It was a summing-up of Jefferies' imperative and unconscious wish to reform mankind.

Though very original, his ideas suffered from a lack of formal education, they were extremely moving and philosophically very important, but Jefferies knew little about academic philosophy. He would have written a better book if he had lived 75 or 80 years later and had the advantage of linguistic philosophy, which would have given him the right words to use. His writing is real, moving, poignantly true, and deeply concerned with time. He turned time on its head, and reformed our vision of time . Eternity is Now; ordinary time means nothing. He compares time to a current in a brook. The clock, he said, may make time for itself, but not for him. If he put his hand in water, the flow (or time) had passed away. He wanted to reform the process of our thinking by cutting away the growth of superstition and conventional thought, to get back and make a wholly fresh start , in order to consider what life means.

Some of Jefferies' writing however is woolly. Influenced by the Christian Socialism of his day and by Dr. Arnold's muscular Christianity. Jefferies knew that he hadn't much time to write, and his message stands out with hard clarity. If only we could cut away myth, and fashion, and slogan, and get back to reality. If we could have one hundredth part of Jefferies' clarity of vision the world would be a much better place than it is. Mr. Anderson praised the Society for helping to keep Richard Jefferies' thought alive. His vision will not die, but may come to fruition in the future for the good of humanity.

\* See Introduction by C.J.Longman to *The Story of my Heart*. Silver Library Edition.etc. Also *Richard Jefferies. Man of the Fields*, Looker/Porteous. These Notes circulated with Mr. Anderson's approval.