

This review, which appeared in "SCRUTINY" for March 1938, is included in our Talks and Article series as an important and historic contribution to the critical appreciation of Richard Jefferies by an outstanding critic.

SCRUTINY

COMMENTS AND REVIEWS pp.435-446

LIVES AND WORKS OF RICHARD JEFFERIES

JEFFERIES' ENGLAND—Nature Essays by Richard Jefferies, Edited with an Introduction by S. J. Looker (Constable, 8/6).

RICHARD JEFFERIES, Selections of his Work, with details of his Life and Circumstance, his Death and Immortality, by Henry Williamson (Faber and Faber, 7/6),

HODGE AND HIS MASTERS, by Richard Jefferies, revised by Henry Williamson (Methuen, 7/6).

Mention Richard Jefferies to anyone under thirty-five and he or she will almost certainly say 'Do you mean *The Story of My Heart* man? I never read it'; and they may recollect having read *Bevis* when young. An uninviting title and a boys' classic seem to be all that remains for the majority of a once considerable reputation. It is excellent therefore that selections from his works should be issued now to bring him before a new public, calling attention to the variety of his genius, with critical essays by the editors enouncing its nature. Unfortunately these selections have been undertaken, by the wrong people or in, the wrong spirit. It is not true, as some of the reviewers alleged, that they have chosen almost identical extracts—only two pieces are in fact duplicated—but neither book is likely to do Jefferies much good in the way of inducing the intelligentsia to give his entire *oeuvre* a trial. Mr. Williamson's selection is, much the more attractive and more just in its representative variety, but unhappily so strongly does the editor's personality interleave the pages and so possessive is his attitude to his victim ('My Jefferies' he calls him, and apostrophises and converses with him with complacent impertinence)¹ that many readers who will decide or have long ago decided that they can't stomach the author of *The Village Book* will not realize that Jefferies is quite another kind of writer on rural themes. It would be a pity if Jefferies should become the property of Mr. Williamson, as Cobbett became the property of G. K. Chesterton.

Jefferies was one of those comprehensive geniuses from whose work you can take what you are inclined to find. Mr. Looker selects to sell us a noble Victorian Jefferies (the mystic, the nature-philosopher, etc.) and not unintentionally: 'It is the purpose of this book to show the real Jefferies ... It celebrates the author of *The Story of My Heart* . . . [where] Knowledge has given place to Wisdom.' This is scarcely an aspect that will appeal to the contemporary public, and reviewers indeed found Mr. Looker's Jefferies dull. From the other selection, which while keeping the same principle (of chronological representation) might have been made far more intelligently, you would conclude that Jefferies had written a much larger

proportion of weak, ephemeral or eccentric stuff than is the case, and you are deprived of most of his strongest, finest and characteristic things.²

Disinterested campaigning for Jefferies would rather ask Messrs. Hutchinson to reprint Edward Thomas's *Richard Jefferies, His Life and Work* (1908) (preferably in the cheap pocket edition); since second-hand booksellers ask a guinea for this *Life* there must be a long-felt want. This book should be recognized as a classic in critical biography, to stand with Lockhart's Scott and Mrs. Gaskell's Bronte in point of intrinsic interest and containing better literary criticism than many critical works. The well-known fact that Thomas did hack-work for publishers has probably prevented recognition of this book, which he did voluntarily and evidently took much trouble to perfect. Since subsequent writers on Jefferies take all their facts from him as well as his careful bibliography, generally without acknowledgment, and since there is nothing more to be found out about Jefferies (the old inhabitants who knew him having passed away and Thomas anyhow observing 'Of the man himself we know, and apparently can know, very little'), to reprint Thomas's work would automatically render further book-making unnecessary. His is a model biography. The author is recognized as being present only by the sympathy that informs the narrative and the intelligence that directs the criticism and determines the selections. The selections from Jefferies' works there are so abundant and well-chosen that Thomas's *Life* of itself will send the reader to their sources. Another good piece of Jefferies criticism is an introduction to one of the novels, *Amaryllis at the Fair*, by Edward Garnett, prefixed to the New Readers Library edition.³ Garnett exposes the silliness of the Saintsbury kind of critique of Jefferies and declares, with a supporting argument that is at least as necessary now as it was then, that 'in his judgment *Amaryllis* is one of the very few later-day novels of English country life that are worth putting on one's shelf, and that to make room for it he would turn out certain highly-praised novels by Hardy which the critics and the public, with touching unanimity, have voted to be of high rank.'

In fact Jefferies was a many-sided and comprehensive genius, not merely a peculiarly English genius but one whose interests, ideas, and temperament associate him with other peculiarly English geniuses: he recalls or embodies now Cobbett, now D. H. Lawrence, now Dickens, now Edward Thomas himself and he had a sensuous nature akin to but more robust than Keats; he has too a strikingly contemporary aspect as social satirist, and he is in the central and most important tradition of English prose style. No selection can do him justice that does not present and even stress these aspects of a writer who has been too generally represented merely as a word-painter of natural beauties, a sort of early Keats in prose.

Perhaps a few quotations from a mass of similar material will illustrate his characteristic vein of vigorous feeling.

'Up in the north they say there is a district where the labourers spend their idle hours in cutting out and sticking together fiddles. I do not care twopence for a fiddle as a fiddle; but still I think if a labouring man coming home from plough, and exposure to rough wind, and living on coarse fare, can still have spirit enough left to sit down and patiently carve out bits of maple wood and fit them together into a complete and tunable fiddle, then he must have within him some of the true idea of art, and that fiddle is in itself a work of art.' [*The Dewy Morn*],

‘He minded when that sharp old Miss ___ was always coming round with tracts and blankets like taking some straw to a lot of pigs, and lecturing his missis about economy. What a fuss she made, and scolded his wife as if she was a thief for having her fifteenth boy! His missis turned on her at last and said: “Lor’ miss, that’ s all the pleasure me an my old man got.”’ [*Toilers of the Field*]

‘In this book some notes have been made of the former state of things before it passes away entirely. But I would not have it therefore thought that I wish it to continue or return. My sympathies and hopes are with the light of the future, only I should like it to come from nature. The clock should be read by the sunshine, not the sun timed by the dock. The latter is indeed impossible, for though all the clocks in the world should declare the hour of dawn to be midnight, the sun will presently rise just the same,’ [*Round About a Great Estate*]

‘As himself of noble birth, Felix had hitherto seen things only from the point of view of his own class. Now he associated with grooms, he began to see society from their point of view, and recognized how feebly it was held together by brute force, intrigue, cord and axe, and woman’ s flattery. But a push seemed needed to overthrow it.’ [*After London*].

‘To me it seems the most curious thing possible that well-to-do people should expect the poor to be delighted with their condition. I hope they never will be.’ [*Field and Hedgerow*],

‘There were parsons then, as now, in every rural parish preaching and teaching something they called the Gospel. Why did they not rise as one man and denounce this ghastly iniquity [hanging for sheep-stealing], and demand its abolition? They did nothing of the sort; they enjoyed their pipes and grog very comfortably . . . The gallows at the cross-roads is gone, but the workhouse stands . . . that blot on our civilization, the workhouse.’ [*Field and Hedgerow*],

‘Then to unlearn the first ideas of history, of science, of social institutions, to unlearn one’ s own life and purpose; to unlearn the old mode of thought and way of arriving at things; to take off peel after peel, and so get by degrees slowly towards the truth—thus writing, as it were, a sort of floating book in the .mind, almost remaking the soul. It seems as if the chief value of books is to give us something to unlearn. Sometimes I feel indignant at the false views that were instilled into me in early days, and then again I see that that very indignation gives me a moral life.’ [*Field and Hedgerow*]

And even from *Bevis*, which its editors tell you is an idealization of his boyhood:

‘Loo said they were all hungry, but Samson was most hungry. He cried almost all day and all night, and woke himself up crying in the morning. Very often she left him, and went a long way down the hedge because she did not like to hear him.

“But,” objected Bevis, “my Governor pays your father money, and I’m sure my mamma sends you things’ . . . Bevis became much agitated, he said he would tell the Governor, he would tell dear mamma, Samson should not cry any more.

Now Bevis had always been in contact almost with these folk, but yet he had never seen; you and I live in the midst of things, but never look beneath the surface. His face became quite white; he was thoroughly upset. It was his first glance at the hard roadside of life. He said he would do all sorts of things; Loo listened pleased but dimly doubtful, she could not have explained herself, but she nevertheless knew that it was beyond Bevis's power to alter these circumstances.'

In his own time interest was drawn off at his death in disputations about 'Did Richard Jefferies die a Christian?'²⁴ and when such questions ceased to burn Jefferies was practically relegated with them to limbo. There has always been a garden-suburb cult of *The Story of my Heart* which has assisted in discrediting him. It is an unfortunate title, and the book itself unless read in its place with the whole body of his writings will do him no good. Jefferies was not a 'thinker' whose thinking is of any use to us without the recreation of the experience that occasioned it, and his 'message' is more successfully conveyed in such relations, not in the prose poem which he attempted. The other factor that pushed Jefferies out of sight for the post-war generation was the Bloomsbury cult of W. H. Hudson. The impression that left was that Hudson did everything Jefferies did, only much better because he was an artist, a great stylist, and the other a clumsy amateur who wrote journalism. It is hard now to understand how anyone could have had patience with the precious style Hudson affected or have been interested in his Victorian Utopias. We did not venture to disagree openly with Mrs. Woolf and Mr. Herbert Read and Mr. Murry and the *Athenaeum*, but we privately found Hudson a bore and, in his sentimentalisation of human life, embarrassing. No one had the strength of mind of the child in *The Emperor's New Clothes*, and by the time Hudson had ceased to be read Jefferies had dropped back out of sight. It took the red blood of Mr. A. G. Street and the happy ingenuousness of Mr. Adrian Bell to get country life back into the circulating library. It is generally difficult to persuade people to persevere with *A Shepherd's Life*, the best of Hudson's country books, so discouraging are the first two chapters, yet it is well worth reading: but how strained, how literary, how unconvincing compared with the mounting life that informs *Round About a Great Estate*, to take only one out of a pile of Jefferies' good things. And how Hudson dates! while his predecessor is still a modern. To secure Jefferies his right to be read, several points could be made. One is the intrinsic value as literature of the rural life of much of his work. The large public that enjoyed *Farmer's Glory* and *Corduroy* would equally enjoy in the existing cheap editions *The Amateur Poacher*, *Wild Life in a Southern County* and *Round About a Great Estate* (one of the most delightful books in the English language). Those who have found *Change in the Village* and *Change in the Farm* relevant to their interest in social history will be glad that *Hodge and His Masters* is again in print (a handsome edition, but a cheaper one would have reached a larger public) and will be impelled by that to search Jefferies for more documentation; since three of the least useful chapters have been chosen for the Faber anthology the reprint will be even more welcome. It is characteristic of Jefferies that he expressed regret that Gilbert White 'did not leave a natural history of the people of his day.' The element in Jefferies' writings represented by the interest that Gilbert White lacked is the decisive one; some of his best work can be described as such a natural history—for instance 'The Country Sunday' among other essays in *Field and Hedgerow*, and pieces throughout his other volumes of collected essays,

Nature Near London, The Life of the Fields, The Toilers of the Field. But it also led him to collect folk-lore, rustic idiom and dialect words, and to note dying crafts and changing ways of living at a time when these subjects were little considered. To a far larger section of the intelligentsia an impressive case could be made for bringing Jefferies to their notice as an approved social thinker. His case-history would make useful propaganda; one of those Left journalists who turn out biographies showing that writers like Dickens were really just the same kind of writer as Mr. Alec Brown ought to be instructed to do Jefferies. Starting as a member of the yeoman-farmer class with all its Conservative prejudices and habits of social conformism he emancipated himself by nothing but the force of daily experience and sensitive reflection to a position of daring freedom from the ideas of his class, his age and his country (he died in 1887).

It would be noted in such a Life that he planned to write (and may even have written but never published) works called 'The New Pilgrim's Progress; or, A Christian's Painful Progress from the Town of Middle Class to the Golden City' and 'The Proletariate: The Power of the Future'; that he hated the Church as an oppressor, calling it 'a huge octopus' and noting with pleasure that 'the pickaxe is already laid to the foundations of the Church tower'; that he wrote of 'laws made by the rich for the rich' — 'Most certainly the laws ought to be altered and must be altered'; that he protested in reference to projects for the cultural elevation of the villagers 'For the enjoyment of art it is first of all necessary to have a full belly'; that he never had the smallest hankering after the Merrie Englande past⁵ but wanted the latest mechanism for agriculture and 'the light railway to call at the farmyard gate' and protested that the village had church and chapel but no cottage hospital, library, or lecture system to put the country folk in touch with the mental life of the time— villages should own themselves and have the right by Act of Parliament, like the railways, to buy land back from the land-owners at a reasonable price— 'in the course of time, as the people take possession of the earth on which they stand ...' he writes; that he never idyllicised country life or rested for long content with the sensuous beauties of nature— 'I am simply describing the realities of rural life behind the scenes' he says in 'One of the New Voters' and it might often serve as his epigraph; that he was acutely conscious of the class war and the monetary basis of modern society—*After London; or Wild England*, which is always written of as though it were of the *News from Nowhere* or *A Crystal Age* type of pretty day-dream impresses as contemporary not with Morris or Hudson but with *The Wild Goose Chase* (it seems to me to be a consistent satire on the system Jefferies found himself living under and to be in great part autobiographical).⁶ Jefferies hated the class distinctions which exacted servility from tenants and farm-hands, kept a hold over the morals of the cottager and strangled his independence, and the fierce attacks on this aspect of rural life should make *The Dewy Morn*,⁷ his most considerable novel, a Left Book. I have quoted a significant passage from *Bevis*, and even *Wood Magic*, a story-book for little children, has every claim to be admitted to the socialist nursery. Edward Thomas notes that though Jefferies was aloof and 'not a talker,' yet he 'talked with ease and vigour on his own subjects, most eagerly on the Labour Question.'⁸ These notes, which might be multiplied if space allowed, could feed a new biography which would make Jefferies appear alive and congenial to our younger generation as neither Mr. Looker's lofty thinker nor Mr. Williamson's alter ego can be. And it would have the merit of being nearer to the truth—the truth of Jefferies'

character, that core of his varied writings that unites them and gives them significance. But of course as an account of his work and its importance for posterity it would be ludicrously inadequate, for these facts and quotations only impress when given prominence by extraction and accumulation.

Jefferies' 'message' is so much more complex and deep-rooted that the total impression made by anything he wrote is not of this simple order. For instance, his instinctive humanity and indignant expression of it are controlled by a characteristic irony—that irony of Jefferies' which is so disconcerting that Mr. Looker preferred to ignore it. Nor has *After London* any trace of the crude propagandising and spiritual vulgarity of *The Wild Goose Chase* with which I have suggested a comparison.

For Jefferies was an artist, though not of the Hudson genre. His writing never reaches after effect and seems unconscious of achieving any; he is therefore the best possible model and for this reason alone should be in common possession, as Addison once was. He might indeed, if a judicious selection were made, supersede *The Coverley Papers* (which have got to be a bore in schools) not to speak of those positively vicious models of Style and The Essay children's taste is officially formed on. Thomas's account of his prose cannot be improved: 'These words call no attention to themselves. There is not an uncommon word, nor a word in an uncommon sense, all through Jefferies' books. There are styles which are noticeable for their very lucidity and naturalness; Jefferies is not noticeable even to this extent . . . His style was not a garment in which he clothed everything indiscriminately . . . He did not make great phrases, and hardly a single sentence would prove him a master . . . Though he had read much, it was without having played the sedulous ape that he found himself in the great tradition.' He did not make great phrases. Anyone in Bloomsbury can make a phrase, but Jefferies' effects are cumulative. They express a play of character and an original outlook, so that in their context the simplest groups of words are pregnant, as when he writes in 'Bevis's Zodiac': 'The sparkle of Orion's stars brought to him a remnant of the immense vigour of the young world' or, to take something widely different, in 'The Country Sunday,' when describing the villagers going to chapel in their best clothes 'all out of drawing, and without a touch that could be construed into a national costume—the cheap shoddy shop in the country lane.' The curious anticipations of D. H. Lawrence here are widespread in his mature work and suggest both how original his outlook was and what direction his gifts might have taken had he lived (he died at thirty-eight). Nothing came to him through literature, he is as unliterary as Cobbett though of greater personal cultivation and finer native sensibility; a contemporary suggested, says Thomas, that he avoided literary society deliberately in order to preserve his native endowments. And he is an artist in another sense, that compared with his works his life has little interest—all of him that holds value for us exists complete in his writings. He left no revealing letters, he did not mix in any kind of society, his domestic life was happy and normal.

Why he has not got into the literary histories (Elton does not mention him, Saintsbury is fatuous, subsequent historians have followed one or the other) and the university courses in literature is a mystery, but reason seems to have no hand in deciding these things. Yet as a source of evidence for 'background' courses he is surely more reliable as well as more original than the novelists, as an essayist he has surely more claim to be studied as literature, than all these

Lambs and Paters, and as a novelist himself he cannot be ignored where Hardy is studied (unless on quantitative grounds). Jefferies wrote four novels of permanent worth as well as some negligible ones. I have mentioned *After London*, which is written in Jefferies' mature style—the superb opening describing 'The Relapse Into Barbarism' as the wild supplanted the cities should be a well-known piece. *Greene Ferne Farm* is the best of his early novels, comparable with the Hardy of *Under the Greenwood Tree*, while the most ambitious and novel-like of his later attempts. *The Dewy Morn*, reaches out towards D. H. Lawrence. The contrast between the maturity and originality of the content and Jefferies' clumsiness in manipulating the devices of the novel form is striking and may put off many readers. But the clumsiness is merely indifference, and when in *Amaryllis at the Fair* (another unfortunate title) he found a form that could convey all he was interested in treating without obliging him to satisfy the conventional demands on the novelist, he produced a masterpiece. But both *Greene Ferne Farm* and *The Dewy Morn* are too good to be let stay out of print. The Victorian features of these novels bulk at least as largely in Hardy's novels, but it is only in Jefferies' that the vitality and genuineness of the rest makes that conventional idiom appear ludicrous; most people seem able to read *The Return of the Native* with its 'Do you brave me, madam's?' without any feeling of incongruity between the melodrama of the parts and the total 'tragic' effect. But in Jefferies' novels the best parts are better and more mature than the best parts of most of Hardy's. The portrayer of rustic life who notes the village woman telling the welfare-worker who scolds her for her fecundity: 'That's all the pleasure me an' my old man got' and describes (in *Greene Ferne Farm*) old Andrew Fisher with Ms *Wuthering Heights* past receiving the clerical suitor for his grand-daughter's hand thus:

"Jim! Bill! Jock!" shouted the old man, starting out of his chair, purple in the face. "Drow this veller out! Douse un in th' hog vault! Thee nimity-pimity odd-meddod! I warn thee' d like my money! Drot thee and thee wench!"

is not a novelist who could conventionalize his villagers for purposes of humorous relief as Hardy does. In *The Dewy Morn* he goes further than any Victorian novelist towards the modern novel—I mean the novel that seems to have significance for us other than as a mirror of manners and morals; I should describe it as one of the few real novels between *Wuthering Heights* and *Sons and Lovers*. The final justification for asking the twentieth century to read Jefferies is, in Edward Thomas's fine words, that 'His own character, and the characters of his men and women, fortify us in our intention to live.' And we are more in need of fortification now than when those words were written.

We are now waiting for some sensible publisher to launch the Wiltshire Edition of Jefferies' Collected Works, preferably at 3/6 apiece—Jefferies must be more or less out of copyright now—with Jefferies' wood-anemone-leaf signature stamped on the covers. It should lead off with Thomas's Life, follow with *Greene Ferne Farm* and *Amaryllis* in one volume, third *The Dewy Morn*, then the other out-of-prints (*Toilers of the Field*, *Red Deer*, *The Hills and the Vale*) then those not available in cheap editions (*Hodge*, *Field and Hedgerow*), then all the rest. Those essays that have never been reprinted might be dug up from the nineteenth-century magazines he wrote for, and collected for us, perhaps by Mr. Adrian Bell. Mr. Williamson is not to be allowed, as two publishers have here allowed him, to

print his barn-owl device with Jefferies' wood-anemone on the title-pages (though he says 'I know you won't mind [Jefferies]'); he or anyone else is to have no finger in it. Jefferies needs no editor to stand between us and him and to interpret him by the light of petty egotism, he needs only to be available entire in a cheap and attractive form together with Edward Thomas's book. I am sure this publisher would not lose his money.

Q. D. Leavis.

NOTES

¹ Someone ought to register a protest against this kind of vulgarity, from which no dead writer seems to be safe. Posterity will think the twentieth-century *literati* had no spiritual manners. Jefferies has been one of the worst sufferers—*c/f.* Guy N. Pocock's introduction to the Everyman *Bevis* and the last life, an indefensible piece of book-making by Reginald Arkell, *Richard Jefferies* (Rich and Cowan, 1933).

² Though not all—there are two good long selections from *Amaryllis at the Fair* which ought to send people to the novel.

³ Now O. P. Garnett's introduction is still accessible in Vol. 4 of *Modern English Essays* (Dent).

⁴ See Thomas's Life and Bibliography.

⁵ 'Dearly as I love the open air, I cannot regret the mediaeval days. I do not wish them back again, I would sooner fight in the foremost ranks of Time.' — 'Outside London.'

⁶ No selection from it is given in either anthology but it is fortunately still in print in the New Readers Library and should make a popular class-room text.

⁷ O.P. Nothing from it is given by either editor. Jefferies requested the publisher not to give the MS. to a Tory reader, who would be certain to reject it. Jefferies refused help from the Royal Literary Fund, which might have prolonged his life, because 'he believed that the fund was maintained by dukes and marquises instead of authors and journalists.'

⁸ Here is an interesting passage from the posthumous thoughts on the Labour Question': 'Then, for Heaven's sake, let us all have a fair chance: do not make its possession dependent upon morality, virtue, genius, personal stature, nobility of mind, self-sacrifice, or such rubbish.'