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J.W.NORTH, HIS ASSOCIATIONS WITH RICHARD JEFFERIES AND HIS FAMILY.

by Mrs. Berta Lawrence

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In the West Somerset parish of Nettlecombe where the fine manorhouse Nettlecombe Court, owned for centuries by the Trevelyans and by Raleighs before them, is now a Field Studies Centre, there is a sequestered hamlet called Beggearn Huish lying beneath the brown Brendon Hills. Its name means Beggars' House; some people have attempted, without supportive evidence, to connect it with the Friars. Its cottages are built of the local red sandstone, a few of them cream-washed. The adjacent ploughed fields are a rich red, and red sandstone garden-walls run alongside the roads. It will be recollected that Jefferies commented on the redness of this landscape, its soil, stone, stream-beds, pathways winding red bands through the green.

At the corner of a lane there lies a long rectangular house of beautiful rosy-pink sandstone, fronted by a small lawn and a gravel drive. Its seven upper windows, its door and two long lower windows, have white paintwork. Its coach-house with arched entrance, makes part of the building, and its old ivy-clad stables stand outside the main gateway. Although unoccupied for some time the house does not look forsaken or neglected.

It belongs to the old Somerset family of Wyndham, as it did a century ago. This is Beggarnhuish House, home of the artist, John William North, during the years of his married life 1884-1898. Here his eight children were born and his wife Selina died. This was the house to which in 1887 he invited Jefferies' widow and 12 year old son for a visit of several months. Richard Harold Jefferies cherished happy memories of it; he mistakenly referred to the place as Washford, near Dunster. Washford was the postal address of Beggearn Huish, Dunster is about five miles away. He wrote that he had great fun at North's house, *especially when playing in the splendid orchard with its many varieties of apples and other fruit. The orchard was on a considerable eminence at the rim of a railway cutting, where I could indulge one of my favourite pastimes, watching trains.*"[1]

The high walled orchard is there still, loaded this autumn with ungathered apples and pears. The railway line is disused and much overgrown with long grass and weeds. It was not an ordinary passenger line, but part of the West Somerset Mineral Railway that carried trucks of iron ore down from the mines on the Brendon Hills to the little port of Watchet. These mines were worked mainly by Welsh miners and closed down as an unprofitable venture by 1900.

For a short time after 1898 North did live in a house near Washford, in the hamlet of Bilbrook. Perhaps he shared the home of his artist friend Robert Macbeth. From 1868 till 1924; when he died, North lived in half-a-dozen houses in West Somerset, loving the region and painting its landscapes with enthusiasm. When Richard Jefferies visited him in 1883 North was still a bachelor and living at Woolston Farm in Woolston, a hamlet of the pretty Quantock village Bicknoller. Woolston has a common where until recent years gipsies frequently camped as in North's picture Gipsy Encampment. The tenant of the house was a Mrs Thorne, who had been the mistress of Halsway Farm where North came to live in 1868. When in 1870 she moved to Woolston her paying guest chose to move with her, remaining until 1884 when he married. His friend Frederick Walker stayed at Woolston with him in

1870, painting his picture The Plough in a field near the adjacent village of Stogumber. Walker noted: "*splendid day's work on the Plough.*' *long consultation with North it is already much better*".

Walker died young in 1875. Jefferies' essay *Summer in Somerset* [2] reveals that North had talked to him about Walker's visit and shown him the places Walker frequented.

North's address is often quoted as Halsway Farm. He was there only two years. Situated at the Tudor house called Halsway Manor, which was then dilapidated, and is now the centre of the English Folk Song and Dance Society, it makes part of Growcombe parish as in North's time.

As he tells us, Jefferies came to the Quantocks in 1883 after staying at Exford and Dulverton and rooming Exmoor in search of material for his book *Red Deer*. In the Quantocks he stayed with North, as North's youngest and only surviving daughter, a lady in her eighties with a very clear memory, remembers her father mentioning. In the Quantocks Jefferies laid hold of material for his beautiful essay *Summer in Somerset*, posthumously published in 1887 in the *English Illustrated Magazine* and illustrated by engravings made from North's drawings. The two men's companionship is obvious. Draw on the map a circle with a 4-mile radius around Bicknoller and the places in the essay, named or unnamed, emerge: Bicknoller itself, Crowcombe, Stogumber, Holford and Monksilver which provided material for the chapter A Manor House in Deer Land in *Red Deer*. (Also named are Dunster, Selworthy, which are further off, and Dulverton and Exford.)

Bicknoller is neither named nor illustrated. Identity is easily deduced from such features as the decaying stocks, black yew, stone cross in the churchyard and the little yew that peered over the tower-parapet until 20 years ago. Crowcombe, drawn and labelled by North, is equally identifiable from Jefferies' description of the village cross, the sculptured shaft in the churchyard, the old church house used as school and almshouse. Jefferies does not name Stogumber, but North has drawn its water-mill and also supplied an illustration labelled Farm Architecture which shows a byre with the stout circular stone pillars Jefferies admired. On the drawing is written 'Curdon's Somerset' - Cordon Farm is a Stogumber farm. The path from Bicknoller to Stogumber mill and the meadow of wild flowers beyond were those that Walker knew, (it would also interest Jefferies to see in Stogumber church the effigy of Sir George Sydenham, owner of Combe Sydenham, Monksilver and father of Elisabeth, Drake's bride and heroine of the legend he incorporated in A Manor House in Deer Land.)

Jefferies writes that he walked in a Quantock glen, musical with the voice of a stream running down a deep coombe between the oaks on the hills -North has supplied a sketch of Holford Glen which is part of the Alfoxden estate (Alfoxton). This is the 'dell' with stream, flimsy footbridge, hollies, waterfall, so often mentioned in Dorothy Wordsworth's Alfoxden Journal; it is the 'glade', wreathed with periwinkle and primroses, where Wordsworth composed Lines Written in Early Spring.

Significantly, three of North's illustrations 'Holford Glen', 'Farm Architecture¹' and 'Farm under the Quantocks' are all dated 1883, the year Jefferies wrote the essay.

North is buried in Nettlecombe 'new' cemetery which lies not far from the church, in a combe shaded by massive oaks. His grave, under an ash, close to a stile overlooking fields and a farmhouse, has a forlorn aspect. Half-hidden in long grass, it is marked by a rough grey stone very simply Inscribed, without any text :

In Loving Memory
of
John William North
A.R.A. R.W.S.
Who died December 20 1924
aged 82

Readers of Richard Jefferies know that North was a generous friend of Jefferies and his wife. Miss Bet North possesses sheets of fine watercolour paper, which her father spent much time and money on perfecting, upon which are printed his personal recollections of the last hours of Richard Jefferies[3].

Her brother owned several copies of Jefferies' books autographed by Jefferies and given to North. These were lost, with the portrait of North by Herkomer, [4] when the owner had to abandon his possessions in Hong Kong at the time of the Japanese invasion.

NOTES

1. "*WORTHING CAVALCADE. RICHARD JEFFERIES. MY FATHER*," by his son, Richard Harold Jefferies. Ed. S.J.Looker. Aldridge Bros. 1944
2. published in *FIELD AND HEDGEROW*, 1889; and in "*JEFFERIES' ENGLAND*." Ed. S.J.Looker. 1937.
3. These writings are quoted by Walter Besant in "*THE EULOGY OF RICHARD JEFFERIES*," Chatto & Windus 1888, commencing at page 360. The book was published with the full consent and co-operation of Mrs. Jefferies.
4. Herkomer: noted painter and engraver, member of the Royal Academy, who had a house in the neighbourhood of Washford, at the time North lived at Beggarn. Huish

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