

JESSIE JEFFERIES – LEST WE FORGET

Peter K. Robins and Cyril F. Wright
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For someone who knew Richard Jefferies better than anyone during his short life, remarkably little is known about JESSIE JEFFERIES, who was his wife; the mother of his three children; adviser and amanuensis in his literary work; nurse in his afflictions. She is little mentioned in the biographies, and much of her life in the forty years after Richard's death, is a mystery.

Jessie Baden, eldest child of Andrew Baden by his second wife, Emma, was born at Day House Farm near Coate, Wiltshire, and baptised in Chiseldon Church on May 5th. 1853. The substantial and imposing farmhouse, replacing a thatched one on an adjacent site that burnt down, is about ten minutes walk from the former home of Richard Jefferies, along the shady lane that continues to Badbury and Liddington Hill. Andrew Baden was a tenant-farmer, with "nearly 300 acres, — all excellent meadow land".¹ The Baden family was well-known in north and central Wiltshire; a branch owned manorial property at Enford, near Pewsey.

James Luckett Jefferies, Richard's father, though farming under forty acres, was at anyrate, the owner of his little homestead. Unfortunately, ownership brought certain obligations, as a result of which he decided to mortgage the property in 1868. It was soon after this time that Richard, having been unsuccessful in the courtship of his two cousins, Mary and Lizzie Cox, transferred his attentions to Jessie, whom, he had known since childhood. He was then, struggling for a living as a newspaper reporter, with the fixed determination to become a successful author.

The family of his sweetheart was a curiously divided one. Andrew Baden had died in 1864 leaving a grown-up family from his first marriage, and the young children of the second. Richard and his two brothers seem to have been friendly with Jessie's own sisters and brother, but the middle-aged half-brothers did not welcome him. It was Joseph Hall, Richard's cousin, who related the since oft-repeated story that two of them, burly six-footers, and former privates in the Lifeguards, turned their opposition towards the young suitor from the verbal to the physical. Richard himself described it as a brutal and cowardly assault.² Whatever the precise reason for this attack, Richard was not deterred. In August 1871, they were engaged, and at about this time, Jessie left the uncongenial and undisciplined atmosphere of Day House to take a position as Governess in the St. Giles district of Northampton.

They were married at Chiseldon Church on, July 8th., 1874. Jessie was 21, and her husband 25. A studio portrait of Jessie, taken in Swindon in the same year shows her with a plait over the back of her head, and with

¹ In letter from James Luckett Jefferies to Dr. Rake (26.11.1896).

² *Richard Jefferies. Man of the Fields.* Looker/Porteous. pp.79/80.

a gentle, placid countenance, not perhaps quite answering Looker's description of her as a Belle of the West Country.

They lived first with his parents in the farmhouse at Coate, and moved in 1875 to 22 Victoria Street (now Victoria Road) in Swindon Old Town, close to the offices of the *North Wilts Herald*, on the staff of which Richard was employed. In the unpretentious, though quite roomy, stone house, one of a continuous row, their son Harold was born. Richard's ambitions and modest success decided him to leave the sleepy Wiltshire town to try his fortunes nearer to London. Jessie must even then have begun to foresee what her marriage to a budding writer might entail for her. His absences from time to time, when he made the home of his Aunt Ellen in Sydenham a base for house-hunting and for contacting editors and publishers, was followed by the move early in 1877 to a plain-looking house on the busy Ewell Road, at Surbiton.

Here their second child, Jessie Phyllis was born, and Harold went to a private kindergarten. The choice of school was just one indication that however modest the income from the current flow of new books, certain standards had to be maintained, Jessie must often have been hard-pressed to ensure the silence in working hours and at mealtimes that her husband enjoined; so that perhaps his long, lone, regular walks into the Surrey countryside offered some relief to herself and the children.³

Because of a serious decline in Richard's health, they moved in 1882 to Brighton. During periods of temporary recovery he made a visit to Exmoor and another to Paris. While he was in Paris, Jessie experienced the strange illusion of seeing her husband walk up to the front door, though at that time, it appears that he had no plans for his return.

At Eltham in 1885, after a further move, they suffered the terrible shock of the death of their third child, Oliver Lancelot, from meningitis. In what was then a semi-rural Kent township, Richard and Jessie became closely acquainted with a lady and gentleman who visited them often, and endeavoured to apply Christian consolation to ease Richard's seemingly troubled spirit. After his death, Jessie wrote to this lady assuring her that he had finally committed himself to Christ. Jessie's simple Christian faith stood firm against Richard's growing agnosticism, and the controversy that raged in the columns of the *Pall Mall Gazette*, after his death, must greatly have distressed her.⁴

In the last months at Goring-by-Sea, when Jefferies was too much weakened by illness to guide a pen, Jessie patiently took down his dictation. S.M. Wiens' scene in the sunlit arbour within the garden, with the sick man resting on a chair—bedstead, and Jessie, pen in hand on a stool by his side, is a unique and beautifully imagined painting.⁵ By 1886 their poverty was such that Richard reluctantly accepted a grant of £100 from The Royal Literary Fund. The closing weeks of his life were unutterably sad. Jessie's only help was a strong, buxom village girl, named Jennie Moss, Their friend and confidant, the artist J.W. North visited them at Goring in the early

³ Worthing Cavalcade . "Richard Jefferies. My Father." by Richard Harold Jefferies. 1944. Page 22.

⁴ Pall Mall Gazette. October 3rd. 1891.

⁵ Reproduced in Worthing Cavalcade 1944.

summer of 1887. It is only too painfully evident of the writer's rapid decline, that on the afternoon of Sunday August 14th, Mr. North, expecting once more to speak with him, found him lying twelve hours dead.

"All through the last days," he records, "his wife was with him day and night, a young country girl who behaved nobly all through."⁶ Jessie was then 34 years old. Richard was buried in the Broadwater Cemetery near Worthing. A fund for his widow was started by the *Pall Mall Gazette*, one of the journals to which he had contributed. Combined with the proceeds of a local fund at Salisbury, and another raised by the *Manchester Guardian*, it reached £1730. Among the subscribers were H. Rider Haggard, Walter Besant and The Marquis of Salisbury. Besant wrote *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies* in 1888, with Jessie's help and approval, with the object of raising a further sum. In 1887, a question was raised in Parliament about Jefferies widow, and the Civil List; and later that year, a pension was granted by the Government.

Jessie Jefferies had been a devoted wife and mother, and had been helpful in selecting suitable titles for some of her husband's books. The previously unpublished essays issued under the title *Field and Hedgerow* in 1889, were her own selection. Only a few of Jefferies' books bear dedications. His novel *Greene Ferne Farm* was dedicated – "To Jessie;" and *Bevis* to Jessie, Harold and Phyllis. There is a well composed photograph of Jessie, described as "the last portrait," which may well have been taken in her early 30's to please Richard. It is a beautiful face, wearing an air of quiet composure. Her daughter long afterwards recalled that her mother was a self-effacing, gentle, amiable person. She was a strongly-built woman, and her son and daughter took after her. She said that it was quite wrong to suppose that Richard had deliberately presented himself as a misanthropic invalid.

Jessie was immortalised as Felise in *The Dewy Morn*. She was also the model for the beautiful and intelligent noblewoman, Aurora in *After London*; and possibly for Margaret Estcourt in *Greene Ferne Farm*. The church in the opening chapter of this book is based on Chiseldon, where Jessie and Richard were married.

Jessie's life after her husband's passing, may be followed, often uncertainly, from disjointed fragments of information and conjecture. Sometimes the widows of great men live publicly in their husband's reflected reputation, but this was not so with Jessie Jefferies. Phyllis was sent at first to stay with her Aunt Sally (Sarah Billing, Richard's sister,) while Jessie and Harold then 12 years old, accepted the invitation of J.W.North to stay with him and his wife at Beggarnhuish House on the Brendon Hills, near Washford in Somerset, a district that Richard had visited in 1882. It was here that Harold enjoyed watching the freight trains of the West Somerset Mineral Railway coming down from the iron mines to Watchet.⁷

How long she remained there we do not know, nor when she moved to Perranporth in North Cornwall. In 1916, Phyllis married Alfred Hargrave at

⁶ *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies*. Walter Besant. Ch. XII.

⁷ Worthing Cavalcade 1944. p. 27. Also see Richard Jefferies Society: Talks and Articles No. 40 "J.W. North, his associations with Richard Jefferies and his family," by Berta Lawrence.

Leamington Spa. Mr. Alan Herrick, grandson of Jessie's sister Fanny, and now in his 70's, recalls that in the same year his great-aunt arrived at his parents' house in London by taxi, having been knocked over by a porter's trolley at Paddington Station. Later that year, when his mother needed an operation, young Alan was sent to Bearley in Warwickshire, where "Aunt Jessie" lived, though he stayed, first with an ex-gamekeeper who wore a scarlet pullover, and later in Leamington, with the Hargraves.

Three houses at Perranporth are known to have been successively the home of Jessie Jefferies. First of all, in Glen Cottage, one of a row of three, now modernised and made into one, Phyllis lived with her before her marriage. Then Phyllis and her husband built a bungalow called Overdale, higher up the coombe near the hamlet of Cox, which Jessie shared with them.⁸ Samuel Looker, who in later years was entertained there by Phyllis, remembers the sloping garden leading down to an orchard, and a row of elms which bounded the garden foot. Today its walls are partly festooned with climbing plants, and it nestles half-hidden from the lane by a high bank crowned with fern. In the pleasant sitting-room, Looker sat at the inkstained table on which Richard had written many of his essays, and which eventually found its way to the Richard Jefferies Museum at Coate, through the courtesy of Miss Christine Billing, Jessie's niece.

Mrs. Nellie Mayes, the writer, who lives in Perranporth, finds that many of the older people remember Phyllis, though her mother seems to be a shudowy figure. One of the local characters, Bobby Mitchell, remembered them as 'ladies,' who bought his butter and eggs. An old lady recollects her father telling her that he went to do some gardening for Mrs. Jefferies, but she was out, and she had left sixpence for him on the water-butt.

The third house, and probably the one in which she died, was Penlu, the address given in *The Jefferies Family Tree*, published privately by Fanny Hall and Florence Bott in 1925. Mrs. Mayes, who has kindly sent photographs of all three residences, finds Penlu to be a solidly-built house of grey stone, now divided into two villas. Jessie died on July 12th 1926 at the age of 73, and was buried on July 16th. in the cemetery of the Church of St. Piran, Perranzabuloe. Unfortunately, no trace of her grave can be found, as many have fallen into decay or are badly weathered.⁹ Her death passed unnoticed in the main Cornish newspapers. The *Wilts and Gloucester Standard* of Cirencester, paid tribute to her in a paragraph headed "A Devoted Life." (July 24th 1926.)

After the death of Mr. Hargrave, Phyllis moved to Seaford, where her cousins Christine and Helen Billing lived. She died there on November 28th. 1958. Harold worked for a time with his Uncle Billing, who was a printer at Guildford, then went to sea, married and settled in Canada, where his descendants reside. One of his eight children Christine Ellen Cecilia (Mrs. Mavis Chase) of Nanaimo, B.C., related that when the news of her birth was received by her grandmother in England in 1911, Jessie was listening to a

⁸ Phyllis was still living there in 1951 when she replied in a note that she was unable to attend a ceremony to erect a memorial seat on Liddington Hill.

⁹ Mr. Peter Robins wishes to thank the Rev. E.B. Warren, Vicar of St. Piran's for the assistance given to him in researching for this article. This tribute was initiated by Mr. Robins.

songthrush in the garden, and asked that the little girl be henceforth known as Mavis. Mrs. Chase remembers having gifts sent over by her grandmother, and understands that in later life she was confined to a wheelchair. Harold died in 1942. His son and grandson, both named Richard Harold, represent the direct male line from Richard and Jessie Jefferies.

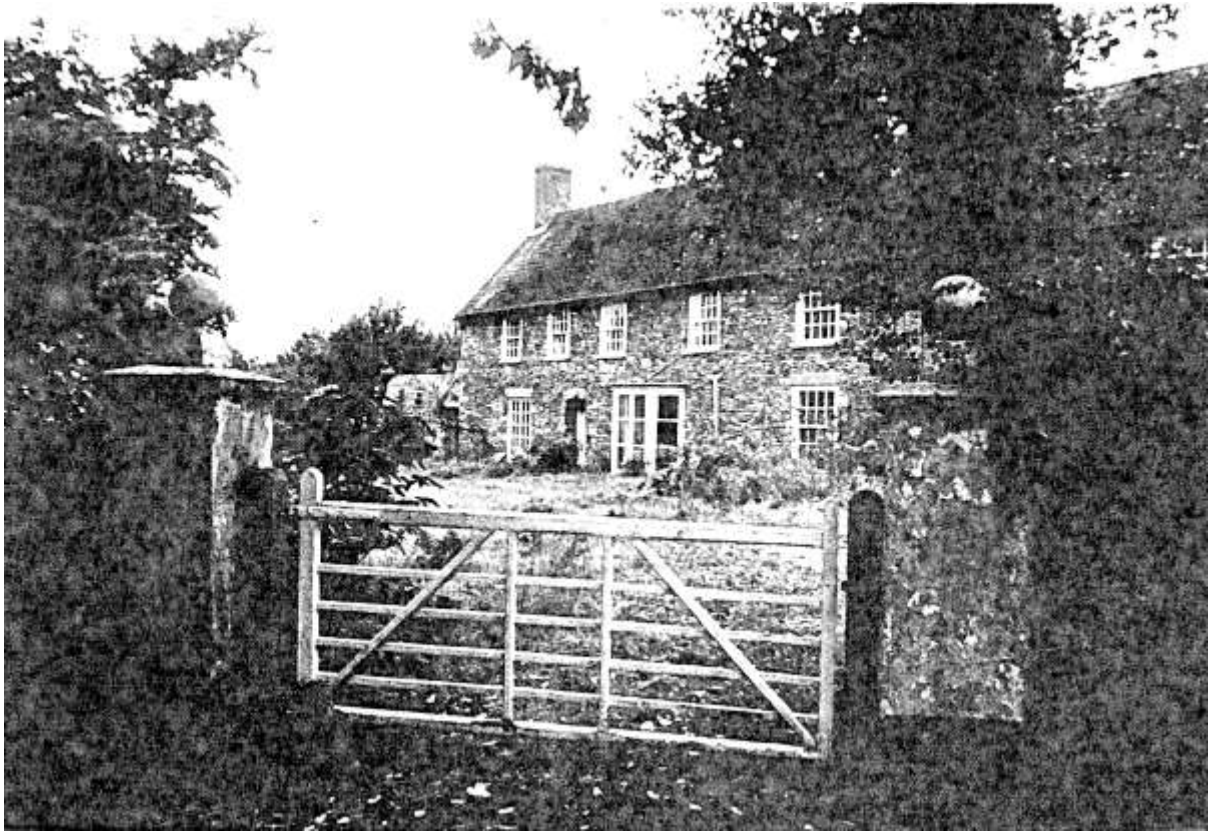
It is hoped that the foregoing tribute, however incomplete, adds something new to the portrait of Jessie Jefferies, whose encouragement and influence upon one of England's most outstanding country writers, in those thirteen precious years of marriage, have been all too little regarded.

Peter K. Robins and Cyril F. Wright
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Notes.

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Also see RJS Newsletter 1981 p.3 and Annual Report 1980/1 p.11. This paper has been revised.



Beggarnhuish House, Nettlecombe, Somerset.
Home of J W North, Artist, who lived here from 1884-1898.

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