

Richard Jefferies Society: Commemorative Weekend, 1987

The Study of Jefferies: Present Achievements, Future Challenges
W.J. Keith

Less than forty years ago, a number of people assembled here in Swindon to celebrate the centenary of Richard Jefferies' birth. We are gathered here now on a rather more solemn occasion to commemorate the centenary of his death. But the solemnity should not, I think, be overstressed. The man died a hundred years ago, but his writings are alive and have much to say to us today. We are here to keep his memory green and fresh through continued appreciation of his writings. This is a time, then, not to look back to a vanished Victorian past, but rather to turn to the immediate past, to consider the present, and to think about the future. Some of you will have attended that earlier centenary in 1948. I didn't, but I am old enough to remember the centenary year, and, because I have been seriously interested in Jefferies ever since, I thought it appropriate to consider at this opening session of the commemorative weekend what has happened in the area of Jefferies studies in the intervening years and to offer some suggestions about what still needs to be done. So this is a talk not about Richard Jefferies 1848-1887 but about Richard Jefferies 1948-1987—and beyond. (That should, incidentally, have been my title, but I hadn't thought it up at the time when Cyril Wright wanted one!)

The 1948 centenary was timely in many ways. The Second World War had recently ended, and there was a dramatic resurgence of interest in the British countryside. Samuel J. Looker, who had been championing Jefferies for a number of years, saw the opportunity at that time of getting as much as possible of Jefferies back into print. Those handsome green Lutterworth Press editions and the less attractive but inexpensive volumes produced by Eyre and Spottiswoode must form the mainstay of many a private library of Jefferies' writings, as they do of mine. Looker was, of course, an indefatigable enthusiast for Jefferies and furthered the cause in a number of areas, but his outstanding contribution, I think, lay in this energetic popularization. He made Jefferies available, and without that impetus it is perfectly possible that we should not be here today. His other main contribution—one of inestimable value, though its fruits were not so immediately obvious—was his collecting of Jefferies' manuscripts. Had he not initiated his personal collection at an opportune time, many original papers that are still extant might well have been lost. His success in this enterprise meant that a large percentage of them were conveniently assembled in one place. They are now, of course, deposited in the British Library, and this is a circumstance that will become of increasing importance in the years to come.

The 1948 celebrations aroused an interest in Jefferies that needed to be perpetuated, and in due course the Richard Jefferies Society was founded here in 1950. The Society has, of course, performed an essential function in keeping Jefferies before the public mind, especially in the area in which he was born and about which he wrote so lovingly. This is not perhaps the time or the place to indulge in what might seem inappropriate, self-

congratulatory detail, but, although I am intimately connected with the Society, I am also—if only by virtue of geography— something of an outsider, so I may perhaps be allowed to say just a little. A considerable number of people have been actively involved in the doings of the Society over the years, and are far too numerous to name individually. But there are three members whose contributions have been outstanding, and they deserve our sincere gratitude today and at all times. These are Harold E. Adams, who took the first all-important step to bring the Society into being, and who served unostentatiously but effectively first as vice-president and then, until very recently, as chairman; the late Frances J. Gay, who as chairman/secretary steered the Society energetically and forcefully from its beginnings until shortly before her death in 1974; and Cyril F. Wright, who succeeded her as secretary, who has provided such reliable and authoritative leadership in recent years, and who with his careful planning has been in large part responsible for the arrangements at this weekend.

But, important as the local situation is, it is the larger picture upon which I want to concentrate this afternoon. And you must forgive me if at this point I become mildly (I hope, only mildly!) autobiographical. Though I had been introduced to Jefferies earlier (I still possess a copy of *Bevis* with the E.H. Shepard illustrations, a Christmas present from my paternal grandparents in 1943), it was in the centenary year that my own life became inextricably intertwined with the writings of Jefferies. One of the prose set-texts in the Oxford and Cambridge School Certificate examinations for the school year 1948-9 was *Readings from Richard Jefferies*, and it was at that time, thanks to Jefferies, that my interest shifted from pure natural history to the literary presentation of the natural world. A decade later, when I began to cast around for a subject for a doctoral dissertation, the work of Jefferies presented itself as a topic decidedly in need of further investigation. And what I found then was that, despite the attention paid to Jefferies by book-reading country-lovers, and despite Looker's exertions, he was sadly neglected at an academic level. Very little scholarly attention was being paid to his work. I had, for example, to be my own bibliographer, compiling my own check-list of Jefferies' articles as a preliminary to my research, since no such list existed with any claims to comprehensiveness. Copies of his less popular works were difficult to track down. There was no clear consensus about his position within the literature of the Victorian period. To many specialists of the nineteenth century he was little more than a name.

All this has changed, to a palpable if still fairly modest extent, in the past thirty years. Perhaps I may offer here an example that has only just come to my attention. Only a few weeks ago, I discovered on the "new books" display at one of the University of Toronto libraries a volume by Raymond Chapman entitled *The Sense of the Past in Victorian Literature*. As usual in such cases, I turned to the index under "J." I wasn't very hopeful since such books normally concentrate on figures like Thomas Carlyle or John Ruskin or William Morris or George Eliot or Thomas Hardy—what you might call the "heavies" of the period—and tend to ignore lesser but still important figures. But in this case I was delighted to discover a ten-page section on Jefferies, with special emphasis on *The Toilers of the Field*. Twenty years ago, this would not, I think, have happened, and I am gratified that Jefferies is now

receiving the attention in intellectual circle which all of us here know that he deserves.

Part of the reason for this increased interest is that more material as well as more knowledge has become available. In 1957 Looker had published *Field and Farm*, the last of his editions and one that drew attention to many early articles on agricultural subjects that were previously unknown. In 1965 Looker's biography, *Richard Jefferies; Man of the Fields*, was completed and seen through the press by Crichton Porteous, and although it is in some respects disappointing it included information that had come to light since Edward Thomas's pioneering study; of 1909. Also in 1965 my own *Richard Jefferies: A Critical Study* appeared. It is not for me to say very much about that book, but it did, think, have some effect. Perhaps I can suggest, without impropriety, that (whatever its deficiencies may be) it offered a basic and for the most part reliable survey of his complete body of work, that it presented this with full scholarly documentation (a salutary change), and, last but not least, that it drew academic attention to Jefferies' importance by being the first full-length study of his writings to be issued by a university press.

When I wrote that book, I hoped that it would provide a workmanlike foundation upon which others could build. This has, I believe, been the case, and I would like to pay particular tribute to the excellent work done by Dr. John Pearson, whom we shall be hearing on Sunday. I well remember those heady days in the mid-1970s when, while he was a graduate student at Exeter, I would receive by mail the latest accounts of his discoveries. Through a systematic scrutiny of contemporary periodicals, and a gift for literary detection that left me in awe, Pearson succeeded in unearthing a surprising number of Jefferies essays that had escaped the attention of earlier researchers, and many of these are gathered together in *Landscape & Labour* (1978), the most important collection of Jefferies essays to appear since Looker's time. In addition, Pearson tracked down the elusive *History of Cirencester*, which Jefferies contributed to the *Wilts and Gloucestershire Standard* in 1870. And there have been other notable discoveries and rediscoveries: in particular, Alain Delattre's tracking down of "Ben Tubbs' Adventures," Hugoe Matthews' unearthing of the serialised short novel *The Rise of Maximin* (which Pearson also discovered independently a little later), and Dr. Bill Baker's stumbling upon the manuscript of a hitherto unknown story, "Snowed Up," in the library of King's School, Canterbury. None of these recently discovered stories is a masterpiece, or anything close to a masterpiece, but they add substantially to our knowledge of Jefferies' early literary development.

There have been other notable events in terms of publication. Recently, a somewhat foreshortened but nonetheless welcome edition of Jefferies' *History of Malmesbury* has appeared, for the first time since its original printing in the *North Wilts Herald*. And George Miller has brought out finely printed and bound editions of two hitherto unpublished items, the essay 'By the Brook' and the discarded chapter from *Round About a Great Estate*. Looker's popularization example has also been emulated. A number of publishers, large and small, national and local, have kept his work in the bookshops. We should be grateful to all of them, but especially notable are the Penguin English Library selection, *Landscape with Figures*, edited by

Richard Mabey, and (because he is the first important writer since Henry Williamson to speak forcefully about the quality of Jefferies' writings) John Fowles's introduction to the World's Classics *After London* and the recently published *Round About a Great Estate*. Because of all these achievements, and others like them, a fuller and more comprehensive understanding of Jefferies' whole output is slowly but surely becoming possible.

Let me now offer, almost at random, a specific instance of how minute academic scholarship—you might be tempted to call it dry pedantry, but you would be wrong—can add importantly to an understanding of a writer. Up to twelve years ago, it was generally assumed—by H.S. Salt, Thomas, Looker, and myself, among others—that the essay "Thoughts on the Labour Question" represented late work. But in 1975 Graeme Woolaston was able to assemble cogent arguments, based on a close examination of the manuscript, to suggest that it was written in the late 1870s—and (although Woolaston doesn't say so) this fits with evidence to be found in Jefferies' letters of this period. Now this essay is generally considered to be decidedly "radical" in character, and the frequently stated opinion that Jefferies moved politically from an early conservatism to something decidedly "left wing" has to be modified accordingly. Now I can't resist noting at this point that, although I followed my illustrious predecessors in misdating this essay, its revised date fits better with my discussion of Jefferies' political views than with anyone else's! More important, however, is the fact that here a tiny piece of information gleaned from a manuscript has considerable repercussions in the study of Jefferies as a whole.

Other researchers in various disciplines have, since 1948, added to our knowledge by digging up new facts or relating Jefferies to broader intellectual contexts. Such writers as R.C. Zaehner, Dr. John Robinson, and Patrick Grant have all discussed Jefferies' thought in relation to mystical and other theological writing; Victor Bonham-Carter and Denys Thompson, among others, have attested to his importance for the social and agricultural historian of the Victorian period; others, including J.W. Blench, Roger Ebbatson, Jeremy Hooker, and myself—have written on Jefferies and his connections with other, often better known writers within the British literary tradition; others again, including Raymond and Merryn Williams, have read him in terms of rural politics and class issues. And once again this Society has been active. Any serious researcher into Jefferies in the future will need to work through, the Society's bulletins and newsletters in search of facts and observations—which, though often small in-themselves, take on cumulative value. I am thinking of such matters as the identification of the manor-house in *Red Deer*, the updated and corrected Jefferies family tree, a copy of which Cyril Wright sent me some years ago, and various useful pieces of information gathered about Jefferies' associations with Kent, Surry, and Sussex. In addition, Alain Delattre has offered some spirited and salutary challenges to some of our traditional assumptions over the years, and I for one hope that we shall hear more about the Coate Farm/Draycot Foliat confusion (reported in the last annual bulletin) before this weekend is over.

I am conscious of having mentioned only a small percentage of the work already achieved. Many others have contributed, including writers of

popular books and articles, publishers and booksellers who help to keep his work accessible, and so on. I apologize for the inevitable omissions. But what of the future?

Just before we turn to the future, however, there is one important point that needs to be made. Any discussion of the future necessarily runs the risk of implying that earlier workers in the field have in some way failed to do enough. It is possible that some of the things that I am going to say in the next few minutes may be construed as harshly critical of the work of Samuel J. Looker, and I want to make clear from the outset that such is not my intention. If I may include some distinctively Canadian imagery at this point, explorers, pioneers, surveyors are vitally important in any activity, and Looker was distinguished in all these areas. But we are none of us infallible, and explorers, pioneers, surveyors inevitably make mistakes, draw wrong conclusions, achieve feats that were remarkable in their time but are doomed, in the nature of things, to be surpassed later. So it is with Looker. We all owe him so much, and this should go without saying. But it is ridiculous to expect perfection, and it is important, at this moment in time, to try to be objective and get as close to the truth of the situation as we possibly can. Looker was an amateur with all the virtues and the limitations of an amateur. We should give him full credit for his invaluable early contribution, but we should not be hesitant in facing up to his limitations. I say this in the full knowledge that my own work has been extended and in some respects superseded by Pearson (he discovered all sorts of things that, to put it bluntly, I ought to have found but didn't). By the same token, my efforts to establish the publishing history of Jefferies in the form of a checklist will be totally superseded when the Matthews and Miller bibliography (which I shall discuss in a moment) becomes available. That is as it should be; that is what continuing scholarship is all about. I fully believe that the greatest compliment we can pay to Looker's work—or to anyone else's—is to strive beyond it. So, with that preliminary warning, I ask again: what of the future? Well, one exceptional achievement, both scholarly and practical, appears to be imminent. Hugoe Matthews and George Miller are almost at the end of their long and daunting task of compiling a complete formal bibliography of Jefferies' writings. Now to many of you bibliography may seem a rather remote and esoteric calling, and all bibliographers of any sense (Both Matthews and Miller, needless to say, belong to that company) will concede that the profession has contained and does contain some very odd and very dull types indeed. There are biblio-pedants and bibliomaniacs, but Matthews and Miller, despite the alliterative suggestion of a comedy team, are none of these. I have seen enough advance material to know that this bibliography will be a veritable goldmine of information about Jefferies and his whole publishing career. They aim to describe and identify all editions of Jefferies' work (and, despite the fact that he never approached the status of a best-seller, this amounts to a surprisingly large number of distinct volumes); to list all his periodical publications so far as they are known and, in the case of uncollected material, to give a brief summary of its contents; to locate all extant manuscripts; and to pass on whatever scholarly information they have gathered about the details relating to all these publications. This kind of compilation now exists, in varying forms of

completeness, for most "classic" authors, and it says something for Jefferies' growing reputation that the time has come to pay him an equivalent tribute. This is a book upon which all subsequent serious work will come to depend, and I'm sure we should all look forward to Hugoe Matthews' "preview" account of it tomorrow with great anticipation.

That work has, to all intents and purposes, been done, and seems assured of an appearance shortly. What else do we need? We certainly need a new biography. Edward Thomas's book was remarkable, and still is, given its date and the less than ideal circumstances under which he worked, but it is over three quarters of a century old, is inevitably outdated, and is now known in some areas to be faulty. Had Looker lived to complete his contemplated two-volume work, we would have much more information conveniently assembled. Unfortunately, *Richard Jefferies: Man of the Fields* is sadly marred by errors (the most serious of which this Society has commendably corrected in one of its publications); in many respects, it is a botched job. Much of the blame for its deficiencies must be laid at the door of Crichton Porteous. However, even if Looker had lived, it would, I suspect have been imperfect. He was not a trained biographer, and he lacked the rigorous discipline that modern scholarly biography demands. In view of the new discoveries that I have already alluded to, many of which occurred after Looker's death, there now exists the foundation for a much more substantial biographic study. What is needed is a properly qualified person with the patience, industry, time, and scholarly expertise to marshall all the existing material, seek out what has not yet been unearthed (there must be lots of relevant information still awaiting discovery) , and select and present it with accuracy and good judgment. (Personally, I wish John Pearson would undertake the task, but circumstances may not permit. Or perhaps, when the bibliography is in press, Matthews and Miller will be looking for something else to do in their spare time!)

What else? High on my list of more feasible projects would be an edition of Jefferies' letters. If someone were to make a systematic study of them, track down all surviving clues to locations, transcribe them accurately, arrange them in order, and then edit and annotate them in accordance with the knowledge available, an extremely interesting volume would, I think, emerge. Clearly, Jefferies was not one of the great letter-writers; we are unlikely to read them for their artistic qualities as letters in the way that we might read, say, Horace Walpole's letters, or D.H. Lawrence's, or John Cowper Powys's, to name only three. But we would, I am confident, gain a decidedly better understanding of Jefferies the man. It would probably not be a vast undertaking it would almost certainly be an intellectually rewarding one. If there are any young researchers in the audience looking for a manageable thesis topic, please take note!

Another much-needed edition, in my view, would be a new and improved transcription of the surviving notebooks. Looker's editions (he offered a hasty selection in 194-1 and a more ambitious version in "194-8) are fascinating for what they promise but infuriating in their execution. They are, for one thing, very difficult to read, and he was ill-served by the copy-editors at Grey Walls Press (if they employed any), who failed to insist upon clear distinctions between Jefferies' text and Looker's interpolated

comments. The whole status of the editions is in doubt, and I would like to discuss this matter in a, little more detail, not to score cheap debating-points off Looker, but to show the inadequacy of what we have and to make a plea for improved standards in the future. In his foreword to the 194-8 edition, Looker remarks that parts of one notebook were in shorthand that he was unable to decipher. (Pearson tells me that he has now deciphered these—a good example of how our knowledge can progress. He also says that the new material is only of marginal interest; nonetheless, it would be good to have.) Looke: then asserts that he has otherwise made "a fairly extensive reduction of the whole of the notebooks" (p.18)—whatever that means. "Reduction"? Can he mean "redaction"? And what does "fairly extensive" imply? What and how much has been left out? In a subsequent statement printed in *The Bryanston Miscellany* he states that "about one-third of the contents of the diaries and nature notebooks" remain unpublished." If this is accurate (he doesn't appear to be referring to lost notebooks), should we not have that third?

There are other problems. While one would expect the entries in the 1948 edition to be fuller than those of 1941, if one collates the two texts where comparison is possible between the two, one discovers not only that there are considerable discrepancies between the readings but that, not uncommonly, the later text omits material that appeared in the earlier. Misreadings on Looker's part or misprints on the part of the compositors are apparently frequent. Even when he presents a photographic facsimile, one finds variants in the printed text. On several occasions, I would be prepared to bet dollars to doughnuts (as they say on what is now my side of the Atlantic) that Looker has failed to understand the original (he seems especially unreliable when flower names are involved). Moreover, a good many years ago I was looking through an early scrapbook of cuttings in the possession of the Society and came upon a copy of a letter by Looker to the *Wilts Herald and Advertiser* in 1952 in which he admits not including in his edition places where "Jefferies uses the names of various books and their authors, which he was either reading, wished to read, or had for review." The last phrase is especially intriguing. Again, Pearson, who had just examined them, said that he hadn't noticed much in that area, but it is still one more indication of the uncertainties that exist with the notebook material. In addition, there are numerous allusions, quotations, and references that need to be followed up and identified. The editions that we have seem demonstrably inadequate; I fear that this work needs to be done again.

There is also a good deal that might still be achieved locally. I would like, for instance, to see an informed study of Jefferies' use of dialect. The *Note books* and several of the essays clearly reveal that he was interested in local and dialect words, and he used them extensively in his later fiction. A comparison with existing studies of Wiltshire dialect would be in order. (Not long ago, someone wrote a thesis on Thomas Hardy's use of dialect along these lines, and produced some interesting results.) I also suspect that a careful scrutiny of nineteenth-century local maps, alone: with scholarship already existing on the subject, would throw interesting light on Jefferies' use of field-names. (I noticed with interest that a meeting of the Society was

recently devoted to this subject; surely more might be done.) The extent of his early journalism is another fruitful topic. Although such scholars as Pearson and Delattre (and doubtless others) have done some work in this area, I suspect that a careful examination of local newspaper files from mid-century would turn up new information—not necessarily on Jefferies but on his family and on local subjects that pertain to his work. *Jefferies Land* is a local volume that would repay closer attention; the margins of my own personal copy are littered with question-marks. Many of these queries involve Jefferies' antiquarianism, and such related topics as his ability⁷ as a local historian could be profitably investigated.

In the larger area of Victorian studies, there is also room for further work. A study of the relation of Jefferies' articles on agricultural matters to the standard positions generally held in the national, and local press would be worthwhile. His relations with individual journals and editors, many of whom were of dramatically different political and social persuasions, are equally promising areas of research. A chronological study of Jefferies' fiction, with special attention to the recently discovered early materials, seems timely, as does a comparison between Jefferies¹ work and the conventions of Victorian popular fiction. When I began my own work on Jefferies I had hoped to write a dissertation on "Richard Jefferies and the Art of the Essay." That never got written because it seemed necessary to write my more general literary study first; but now the time may be ripe. And personally, I have been interested for a long time in Jefferies' reading (which is one reason why I'm interested in those unpublished allusions to books in the notebooks). There is a good deal of evidence to be culled from the specific allusions in his books—quotations, literary references, etc. A lot could be learned about his intellectual range if this evidence were closely sifted. And what about the more general topic of his artistic tastes? Finally, if someone had the time and patience, a compilation of what we know about Jefferies' movements from day to day—where he was and what he did—would be a valuable first step towards a new biography.

"So little done, so much to do." The purported famous last words of Cecil Rhodes were imprinted on my memory as a child, perhaps because we regularly passed his birthplace on the way to visit my grandparents. The sentiment does not fit the present occasion like the proverbial glove, since a great deal has already been achieved. But there is still much to do. Jefferies is a rich and complex figure, and it will be a long time before the intellectual possibilities of his work are exhausted. Enough, surely, to keep his admirers busy until the bicentenary of his birth in 2048.