

RICHARD JEFFERIES AND OTHER WRITERS

by Paul Casimir, A.L.A.

Richard Jefferies died in the year 1887, when the nineteenth century was drawing to an end. The "Sea of Faith" of Matthew Arnold's poem had retreated, leaving England, if not less religious, at least less dogmatic upon the subject. Great figures in literature had out-written themselves, or were soon to die, or had already left the stage. It was indeed the closing, the sad closing, of a century.

It is evident, therefore, that the writers first to have examined the work of Richard Jefferies will be of this period, and that their opinions are likely to have been influenced by the thought of their time. Henry Salt and Walter Besant wrote almost the first critical reviews of Jefferies, except for obituary notices and articles by Lord Lynton and Edward Garnett.

Walter Besant was a novelist of "social reform," who had been influenced, by George Gissing, The most significant feature of his sturdy of Jefferies - The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies - is the debatable one of Jefferies' religion. I am quite sure my-self that Jefferies -was - if we .must label him - a pagan and a pantheist. He believed in personal immortality only in moments of intense emotion, on the downs in The Story of My Heart, when he is lying on "a grass-green tumulus", and when "the abstract personality of the dead seemed as existent as thought". Walter Besant, a Victorian author, was still held by the need to excuse this lack of a religion. His is the late nineteenth century's reaction to Jefferies; and he concludes his eulogy with Jefferies' supposed deathbed conversion to Christianity. If we recall how even Voltaire was "converted" at his death, it is easy to conclude that the words of a dying man are of no value, and not to be placed above the complete "earth sufficiency" of The Story of My Heart.

So believed Henry Salt, a much better interpreter of Jefferies, and a much more interesting writer than Walter Besant. Henry Salt - the detractor of Tennyson - was a nineteenth century rationalist. The advance of science and new thought on the origin of man had turned those who, in a previous century would have been passionate religionists, into passionate rationalists. So Salt defended Jefferies against the charge of religion. In his Richard Jefferies; His Life and His Ideals, he examined him as a man, an author, a novelist, but most important, as a thinker. Salt believed that Jefferies's creed was thus expressed: "I believe in the human being, mind and form," flesh and soul". Salt denied the death-bed conversion, and placed his hand on one element I think strong in Jefferies' work - that of sadness. Perhaps Jefferies, like Salt himself, could not escape the isolation that thinkers of the late nineteenth century experienced within themselves at the withdrawal of God. For this pointing Salt's book on Jefferies is important.

Between Henry Salt's book and our next work - Edward Thomas' study - there were a number of minor writings, including articles in the Pall Mall Gazette and the National Reformer on the vexed question of Jefferies' religion. A great many journals seem to have contained articles on him from the Unitarian Inquirer to the Bookman. Also Henry Salt published other works. Then, in 1909, Edward Thomas published Richard Jefferies, His Life and Works. Richard Jefferies had been an inspiration to Thomas from his youth and his early visits to Coate, near Swindon. Edward Garnett called Thomas's book "one of the most perfect biographies in the language", and if nothing more, the Wiltshire background is well done. For the regional aspect of Jefferies appealed most to Thomas. Yet, he devoted a chapter to The Story of My Heart, with ample quotations. Another aspect Jefferies' thought which seemed to have interested his biographer very much was the former's creed of the superman. "Give us", says Jefferies, "greater strength of "body, greater length of days; give us more vital energy, let our limbs be mighty as those of the giants of old" ... Thomas stressed this desire for physical perfection, an aspect of Jefferies which has little to do with his nature writings, but is more akin to the Utopias of the early Wells - Men like Gods - for example. Thomas believed that Walt Whitman had had a marked effect on the thought of Jefferies in the latter's stress on physical perfection and hatred of all denial. Before commencing his life of Jefferies he wanted to trace letters and magazines which might help him prove that Jefferies had read Whitman. In fact, we are a long way from the "religious-apologist", Besant, and the "militant-rationalist", Salt, We are nearing the modern conception of Jefferies - a twofold conception of writer on nature and mystic. Yet it is as the writer on nature that Jefferies appealed to and influenced Edward Thomas, and it is that aspect which he favoured.

In 1920 was published a little book called The Life Worship of Richard Jefferies, by one A. F. Thorn, which took the so-called mystical element in Richard Jefferies and "bound it between two covers. The book is poorly written, and in many words, says no more than that man is part of nature and that the future of the race must stress this aspect. In fact, Thorn's book illustrates the danger in The Story of My Heart of reading too much into it. John Moore called The Story "a painful and embarrassing book ..." while Geoffrey Grigson wrote of Jefferies' "weakness...ordinariness...softness". This is for me a fair criticism of some of his work. There is much that is true for our time in The Story of My Heart - a full, rich and superb physical life, - but the language is often plushy. Perhaps, Richard Jefferies had drunk too deeply of Ruskin, for a number of critics have detected this flavour in his work. Finally, Samuel Looker, T. R. Arkell and Malcolm Elwin, are the three contemporary writers or selectors of Jefferies whose work needs inclusion here; the former especially as one of the most enthusiastic student living of our author. Henry Williamson also has written upon Jefferies, but he belongs rather to the section of this essay which deals with writers definitely influenced by Jefferies. Perhaps, therefore, a few modern opinions on our author may conclude this outline of writers upon him.

Richard Church in his memorial lecture at Swindon, 6th November, 1948, concluded that the phrase "unclouded happiness" is the key to Jefferies.

Then, the Wiltshireman, novelist and historical writer, Henry Gibbs, sees Jefferies as a "feeler" like D. H. Lawrence, rather than a thinker, and equates him with Elizabeth Myers. Henry Williamson in an article in The Adelphi for October - December, 1948, quotes, amongst others, the following authors as appreciative of Jefferies. The list includes E. V. Lucas, Wilfred Ewart, T. E. Lawrence, W. H. Hudson, Sir William Beach Thomas, Sir John Squire, A. G. Street, Adrian Bell, R. M. Lockley and Reginald Arkell. In fact, a great many creative writers have dealt with different aspects of Jefferies - a pointer, no doubt, to his importance if not his greatness. Perhaps then, I can conclude this section of writers on Richard Jefferies by stressing how different are the opinions on him held by contemporary authors, H. J. Massingham described Amaryllis at the Fair as a "book of rare and classic-poetic quality", - while relegating The Story of My Heart to the class of "tawdry" books. John Betjeman admitted that he was unable to read Jefferies' fiction but seemed to admire his nature prose. Ethel Mannin recalled that The Story of My Heart meant as much for her as Walt Whitman's Leaves of Grass; while G. B. Shaw admitted to having never read any of his books. Diversity of opinion indeed.

I would like now to consider those writers who seem to have been influenced by the work of Jefferies but not those whose approach to life is similar. The talent of Richard Jefferies does not seem to have influenced any great writers - all those who have felt his touch are excellent "second class". Influences are curious things - they become more important as they become less evident in a writer's work. Thus, when really important, they are most difficult to detect. Henry Williamson himself admits that the reading of Jefferies was the bright spot in his unhappy childhood. Like Jefferies, Williamson has written memorable books on nature. But it is in the heart of his writing that we must look for the seed - if any - of Richard Jefferies.

Deep within himself and his writing Henry Williamson is a sad man - yet rarely morbid or sentimental. I do not think the same "hot-house heaviness" exists in his writing as hinders at least for me - my full appreciation of The Story of My Heart. Yet, in this perfume of sadness - like the scent, of autumn bonfires - Jefferies and Williamson are one. Perhaps, it is in the nature of naturalists to feel and portray this sadness - for W. H. Hudson also possessed it. But Williamson is, I think, a sparer and cleaner writer of prose than Jefferies, if a less evocative one. I think D. H. Lawrence had something of the "heat" of Jefferies. Like Lawrence, Jefferies believed himself to be at bottom a thinker and a prophet, rather than merely a writer. If Lawrence overlaid with philosophy so many beautiful nature descriptions in, for example, The Rainbow, Jefferies, for many, spoilt his writing in the same way. Actually, Lawrence compared himself, in a letter to Edward Garnett, with Richard Jefferies: "I give myself away so much", he wrote, "and write what is my most palpitant, sensitive self, that I loathe this book, because it will betray me to a parcel of fools (he is writing, of the Trespasser) ... I often think Stendhall must have writhed in torture every time he remembered La Rouge et Le Noir was public property: and Jefferies at The Story of My Heart, I don't like The Story of My Heart." This is an interesting quotation. Reading it, I remembered a statement about Conrad that he hated the Dostoevsky in himself, that is - that he hated that part of himself

which he saw as Dostoevsky and Lawrence saw as Jefferies. Surely an interesting mental puzzle - we kill not only what we love but what we know ourselves to be!

But what of direct influences? Once, it was common to believe that because the peoples of Central America and the Ancient Egyptians built pyramids, a common origin must be found for both. Today, we are inclined to assume that two-widely separated cultures can reach the same level of civilization given certain conditions of life, and can do this without any physical contact whatsoever. This, I think, holds true of D. H. Lawrence and Richard Jefferies to a great extent, and thus it is in the third section of this paper that deals with likeness, rather than influence, that he can best be included.

It is obvious that, though Jefferies wrote in prose, much of his work assumed the nature of poetry. It is not surprising therefore, that a poet should write the best book upon him -Edward Thomas. "Before the time I was sixteen", Thomas wrote, "I found myself hardly letting a week pass without writing one or two descriptions - of a man, of a place, or a walk, - in a manner largely founded on Jefferies' Amateur Poacher..." Thomas himself wrote an easy and clean style. Describing Jefferies' prose he wrote: "words call no attention to themselves, There is not an uncommon word, not a word in an uncommon sense, all through Jefferies' books." Then, later: "sometimes it is slipshod - in sound often, so., for he had not a fine ear. It comes right, as a rule, by force of true vision and sincerity." I am sure Jefferies' best prose is in the nature books and in Bevis-books untouched by the mysticism of The Story of My Heart.

For in The Story is to be detected the baneful influence of Ruskin, and it is indeed significant that any influence on Thomas's own prose came from The Amateur Poacher and not The Story of My Heart.

Alfred Williams, except for his collection of Folk Songs and his view of English village life at the turn of the century, is not an important creative writer. He was too deeply influenced by nineteenth century literature to be truly original. He encouraged, and was encouraged by, a host of poetasters who dipped their pens in the last glow of the Victorian sunset and wrote amorphous clouds in place of poems. In his Selected Poems Williams pays a tribute to Jefferies - The Earth Lover - the poem is called. I do not think it is a good poem at all, but it is interesting for the lines:

"So said he, thus, and passed away
Forever, and the winter flew".

Alfred Williams was an honest man. He did not falsify this aspect of Jefferies - that death ends the existence of the ego. But there is little affinity between the two writers even on the one point where they might have met - the writing of nature prose. Williams is not as evocative a writer as Jefferies, or as careful an observer of nature as Gilbert White. The sultry flame of Jefferies' thought does not blow over his prose. He admired Jefferies but in no way became his follower. For Williams used the countryside as a background to country characters, whereas Jefferies employed it also as a

stage for his philosophical images. Yet, in Leonard Clark's Alfred Williams Williams is described as swept off his feet reading The Story of My Heart. Williams believed that Jefferies all his life longed for a religious system of beliefs, and in "soul-life" found but a poor substitute. But that, I think, is a false view of Jefferies' philosophy and a near approach to Walter Besant's death-bed conversion. There could be little in common between the two writers, and it was a coincidence of place, rather than an affinity of character or belief, that brought Jefferies and Williams together. It was a similar coincidence of place that made the young Marlborough poet, Charles Sorley, acquainted with Jefferies. In a letter dated 30th June, 1913 - when Sorley was still at Marlborough College - he wrote:

"I sat down (on Liddington Hill) for about an hour reading Wild Life in a Southern County with which I had come armed - the most appropriate place in the world to read it from, as it was on Liddington Hill that Richard Jefferies wrote it and many others of his books, and as it is Jefferies' description of how he saw the country from there....." Then, in the same year, in a note added to Sorley's letters by a master of the College, is this "He (Sorley) was an ardent admirer of authors like Jefferies," and later, by Sorley himself in another letter dated July 1914. "Hence I want to read some good prose again. Also it is summer. And for a year or two I had always laid up The Pageant of Summer as a text for a hot July.....so, unless the cost of book-postage here is ruinous, could you send me a small volume of Essays of Richard Jefferies called The Life of the Fields... in the midst of my setting up and smashing of deities — Masfield, Hardy, Goethe, - I always fall back on Richard Jefferies wandering about in the background". And again in 1914 writing to A. E. Hutchinson he asks : "Do you know that Richard Jefferies, the greatest of English visionaries, felt- exactly the same about the high parts of the downs as you..." Sorley wrote too his poem to Jefferies - a lyric much finer than that of Williams -ending thus:

"But though I see all things remote
I cannot see them with the eyes
With which ere now the man from Coate
Looked down and wondered and was wise."

Sorley died before the ink of print had stained his lips and we can only surmise that out of the love he had for Jefferies might have been born a powerful literary influence. The man from Coate had no more eager disciple.

A writer is made up of two things, perhaps - style and thought - though by the latter I do not mean "a message." For, in our search for a writer's "message" we can easily oversimplify, or read into his writings things which he never intended. This is a very dangerous thing. We all see something different as important in a writer and there is no final judgement. I think the following writers, can, however, be profitably compared and contrasted with Jefferies - that is Shelley, Blake, D. H. Lawrence, Thoreau, Hardy and Gilbert White. Some of these show greater affinities and these I would .like to discuss now.

Many people will disagree about the "essential" Richard Jefferies, in the way Mr. Looker did of the book of that name. For me he is the poet of "earth life"

- of a life lived close, to nature - of a life free of the three giants that killed him ..."disease, despair and poverty." He believed in the perfection of the human form, in the ultimate building of perfect bodies and minds. He believed in altering "the whole mode of thought of the nation" to achieve this. He believed in the evil of denial. He believed in an everyday simplicity of home and surroundings. He believed in the "Spartan" way of life, because this method produced beauty of form and mind, and curiously enough, he believed it might be "exquisite to die pushing the eager breast against the sword". Perhaps, Henry Williamson made a point when he compared Jefferies with Hitler -for to Jefferies the sight of marching troops could bring tears to the eyes. But no - this is an over-simplification. Rather, his admiration for troops and for a death on the sword was perhaps a result of his own ill health- we all want to be that which we are not.

Are all or any of his opinions, thought and beliefs, new? Did they come fresh from his experience? Of their personal origin I do not think we can doubt. They grew from his life and perhaps from his disease. But ideas can be laid out and examined against others. In that case I do not think many of Jefferies' thoughts were very original. Let us examine them.

"Earth-life" is the property of many authors. I quote from Thoreau's Walden: "I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life,..." Then from Walden again: "The life in us is like the water in the river. It may rise this year higher than man has ever known it...the sun is but a morning star". Like Jefferies Thoreau believed in the goodness of the earth, but not in the preservation of the individual when life was ended. From Jefferies now: "Listening to the sighing of the grass I felt immortality as I felt the beauty of the summer morning and I thought beyond immortality of other conditions, more beautiful than existence, higher than immortality". There is, you will agree, if not in expression, a likeness between these two ways of thought. Also, if Alfred Williams was correct in his assumption that Jefferies wished to believe in the divine power of God yet was unable to do so, we can see this attitude, with its resultant pantheistic faith, as a "hangover" of the nineteenth century's loss of religious certainty. Jefferies was very much a child of his time.

We could speculate also on the fact that there are today no important writers with the pantheistic outlook. This may be due to the fact that nuclear power has made even the earth ephemeral, and that we cannot talk of "the eternal hills" any more, in even hitch our need for permanency to the stars. We cannot look up at them and explain: "Here is timelessness". I do not think pantheism is any longer tenable in the manner of Thoreau or Jefferies - the timelessness has gone out of nature! It is in any case an interesting debating point.

Jefferies believed in the perfection of the human form, "Let me be", he wrote in The Story of My Heart, "physically perfect, in shape, vigour, and movement." Then again..."to see a perfect human body unveiled causes a sense of worship". Today, we agree with this and it is no longer revolutionary, "but in Jefferies' time, it was more than a revolt against the

"covering tradition". But, equally, if more pithily, Blake had said the same thing in The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. Then, the conception of the superman - Nietzsche, Shaw, Wells - there are many who have held this ideal. In fact, the parallel between Wells' Utopians and Jefferies' ideal men is very close. In the book Men Like Gods Wells wrote of his "beautiful people" who lived to the full the capacities of their minds and bodies. The beautiful human form is, therefore, no new idea, and the creed of the superman is very old too. Akhnaton of Egypt believed in it in the year 1300 B.C.

Jefferies hated denial, for the perfect mind and body eschewed all asceticism. William Blake said the same in the cryptic line: "He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence". Jefferies added nothing to this, nor, incidentally, did the later Freudians! The simple life, - how many writers from Rousseau to Wordsworth have advocated it. We remember Wordsworth's dictum:

"The world is too much with us, late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers".

That is true for Jefferies also when he wrote: "Not while money, furniture, affected show and the pageantry of wealth are the ambitions of the multitude can the multitude become ideal in form".

What of Jefferies and death? Jefferies, the mystic, wrote out of emotion as much as out of thought. Emotion is apt to soften the hard head of thought. "A tear", for Jefferies, "is not an intellectual thing". Nor was it for D. H. Lawrence. Both were feelers rather than thinkers. Lawrence described himself as an exposed nerve, and this would hold true for Jefferies also. Like Jefferies, Lawrence believed fully in life, but was vague about its other side - death. His "Ship of Death" travelled the same way as the branch of berries on the stream, "For man (Lawrence wrote) the vast marvel is to be alive...whatever the unborn and the dead may know, they cannot know the beauty, the marvel of being alive in the flesh... that I am part of the earth my feet know perfectly, and my blood is part of the sea,..". And Jefferies: "Now is eternity, now is the immortal life. Here this moment, by this tumult, on earth now; I exist in it". For both writers the moment cries: "Now, Now. I am alive and immortal". For both there is no tight logic of thought on life and death. The moment is all.

Jefferies and Hardy, Jefferies and Shelley, Jefferies and Whitman - all these authors offer interesting parallels with him. Hardy's minute observation of nature; Shelley's revolt against the mechanical world; Whitman's belief in the richness of life and man's fulfilment in it. In fact, Jefferies' ideas and feelings can be found in many writers. Edward Thomas saw a resemblance with Maurice Maeterlinck and Henry Williamson with D. H. Lawrence - of thought if not of style. But Jefferies himself had few direct debts. Ruskin alone seems to have helped to form his style.

The purpose which I set myself in this essay was three-fold. Firstly, to examine the impression formed by others of the work of Jefferies; secondly, to trace the stylistic influences, if any, of Jefferies upon other writers; thirdly, to examine his thought and view of life. I think it is fair to say that

his own stylistic influences are very few, that a number of writers of the second rank have experienced his influence and that his ideas were not new.

However, I began by placing Jefferies in his time - the nineteenth century - and his death at the end of that century. In any appraisal of his work it is necessary to do this. In that context he is remarkable for his call to a full physical life. He was never as exact in his statements on this ideal as was William Blake. He lacked the poet's knife edge of words. He wanted a new, clean, simple and natural life, though he never worked out the implications of this belief. He saw, as others have seen, the superman of the future who is the man of today with his "senses five" fully alive, and his forehead -also in Blake's words - "widened". He is worthy to "be remembered for this, as well as for his books of nature, for Hodge, Bevis and the rest. For to him the man of tomorrow was no spaceman in cellophane, but one who lived his eternity on this earth.

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Paul Casimir was born in Jersey on June 16, 1922, of a Polish father and a Channel Islands mother. He was educated in Jersey, where he lived for 20 years, and he worked as a librarian at Swindon. He was married in 1954. Some of his poems have been published in 'Zebra' and 'Swindon Review,' and two have been broadcast by the B.B.C. His work has also appeared in 'Night Watchman,' 'Platform,' 'John O'London's' and 'We Offer'. He was a member of the West Country Writers' Association.