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# The Labourer and his Hire

*This article is taken from The Live Stock Journal and Fancier's Gazette of 30 August 1878. It was the leading article.*

The decadence of the ancient custom of gleaning after the harvest has been made the subject of a curious discussion in the "leading journal" lately, the Rev. P.O. Morris having written advocating a return to the old system. It is clear at once that the rev. gentleman is animated by the best of motives, and in the spirit, if not the letter, of his remarks most of us will agree. A cordial feeling between employer and employed is desirable from every point of view, but then it must not be forgotten that an extraordinary change has taken place in the conditions of agriculture, and that what may once have been reasonable enough may now be very unreasonable. To talk of leaving corn enough about after the wagons have passed for a single family - i.e., the wife and children of a single labourer - to be able to gather 20 or 30 bushels is simply absurd. That kind of argument, by tending to persuade the poor that the farmers are purposely taking from them their rights, is calculated to breed the worst instead of the best feeling; and, in this respect, the tone of Mr Morris's advocacy of gleaning is not a very pleasant one. He fails to see that the state of things has entirely changed. First of all the wages of the labourer have doubled, and, what is perhaps of equal importance, the wages of his children are so much higher. The price paid for the assistance of lads is now a serious matter to farmers; and, as for the girls, even in the country it is becoming quite a difficult thing in farmhouses to get domestic servants.

When Mr Morris replies that if wages have risen so has the cost of living, he again overlooks the circumstances of the case. The agricultural labourer is perhaps the only man who does not greatly feel that increase of the cost of living, which presses upon the rest of us so severely. He gets his cottage as cheaply as ever; in many instances cheaper, because landowners have become awakened to the necessity of providing good accommodation, not only on moral grounds, but because their tenants state plainly that if cottages are not provided they cannot work their farms, as they cannot get men. Gardens are now attached to almost every cottage, some of them of large size; in fact, a labourer of any kind of value would not now stop in a cottage without a garden. This accounts for house-rent and vegetables; there remain bread, cheese, and meat, and clothes. Bread, as everybody knows, is cheap, far cheaper than it was in the best days of gleaning; in fact, it was the high price of the staff of life in the old time that made the privilege of gleaning valuable. Lard, an article much used in cottage households, is imported in immense quantities; so is bacon, and, in short, it might perhaps be said that there never was a time when there was so much cheap food in this country. Even butcher's meat, dear as it is, is more accessible to the labourer now, because butchers in a small way have set up business in almost every little village, so that there is less difficulty in purchasing the cheaper portions. At all events, it is certain that butcher's meat may now be seen in cottages where it never used to be

thought of - and a good thing too. We rejoice to see it so. We have always held that the labourer was fully entitled to share in the progress of these modern times. Clothes are, perhaps, the only doubtful point; they are cheap, but not of such durable material as formerly. Yet it is a fact of which anyone can easily satisfy himself, that the labourers, and the labourers' wives and daughters are better clad than formerly; that, too, we rejoice to see.

When we look round at all the various trades and manufactures and mining industries of this country, when we consider the hundreds of thousands of pounds lost through strikes, and the distress caused by the general stagnation of trade, and then come back and examine the position of the agricultural labourer, the contrast is decidedly in his favour. He has suffered no successive reductions of 10 per cent on his wages till earning 40 per cent less than a few years since, like some of his unfortunate brother workmen. He has not found the furnace blown out, the colliery closed, the mine shut up because there was no demand for the iron or coal, or metal. Farmers have suffered individually, but the farms are still kept on, and work may be had.

Taking these matters into consideration, would it not be correct to say that the agricultural labourers, with cottages, gardens, regular work, and fair wages (for no one complains that wages are not fair now), are one, perhaps the only, section of the labouring community who have enjoyed something like prosperity in recent times. The increased facilities for education that are now placed within their reach are for the most part provided at the expense of farmers and their landlords. Therefore, it does seem that an unfortunate moment has been chosen for an attack on the agriculturist, because gleaning is going out of use. It can scarcely be said to be prohibited - it is going out of use before the reaping machine, and when the self-binding harvester comes into general employment it will go out still faster, if not entirely. The loss to the labourer is more than doubtful, even if we suppose it an absolute loss, and not more than counterbalanced by other advantages. The time spent in gleaning, which is a most tedious operation, had far better be spent in work, and under the present low price of corn the work would pay better. If it is replied that little children can assist in gleaning, the answer is simple - Gleaning is hard work, the perpetual stooping, the long hours which must be devoted to it for any success to be obtained, and the carrying of the great bundles home, are equivalent to very hard work indeed. If children under a certain age are prohibited on the grounds of humanity and mental progress, from so much as the indolent work of bird-keeping, ought they to be permitted to labour at gleaning? When gleaned, what is to be done with it? The flails are extinct, half the village mills are closed, the grain going to the steam mills of London and such centres; the wheat must then be thrashed out by the farmer's thrashing machine, or purchased by him: rather an odd thing to buy one's own wheat.

The conditions under which gleaning was a reasonable thing are gone: then labour was in great part paid for in kind, and perquisites were the order of the day. If a labourer came to receive his £1 to the farmer's door, and were offered so many loaves of bread instead of cash, what would he say? The thing would be absurd.

But there remains the farmer's side of the question. Why does he gather together the dropped wheat so carefully with the horse-rake? Why so anxious to get the stubble cleared early by the aid of reaping machines, so that the steam plough may go to work? Because of the high pressure of these modern times - because he cannot afford to waste time, labour, or material. Arable farming is carried on under enormous competition; one sentence from the report of the Customs Commissioners - a most remarkable sentence, too - will prove this:- "British India supplied (in 1877) during a year of unexampled distress from scarcity of food 6,104,000 cwt. (of wheat), valued at £3,571,000, or 88 per cent more than in the previous year." While therefore, it is desirable to see cordial relations between employer and employed (and, on the whole, the relations do not seem so very bad in rural districts at present), it is extremely unreasonable to expect the farmer to strew his fields with wheat, wait while it is picked up (instead of using the horse-rake), and perhaps purchase it afterwards. A return to the old plan of partial payment of labour in kind - and that is what gleaning really is - would be the very worst thing for the labourer himself.

*The original article had only one paragraph break; three more have been provided here.*

# The Gamekeeper away from Home: a sequel to Richard Jefferies

*Eric Jones*

My great-grandfather, Alfred William Jones, was born in the same year as Richard Jefferies, and in Jefferies Land too.<sup>1</sup> I did not know these facts until I was an adult and none of my family, including great uncles and great aunts who were Alfred's children, could tell me. Little was remembered about Alfred's origins other than that he had arrived in Hampshire as a lad of seventeen, to work as a gamekeeper in Harewood Forest, near Andover, 'on a recommendation between gentlemen'. Alfred spoke like a countryman, someone from the Wessex region. But where exactly he had come from no one knew. In his eighties my paternal grandfather knitted his brow but could no longer recapture the edge of memory.

In a general sense it was understood that Alfred came from a dynasty of gamekeepers and I still own his keeper's whistle and a pocket gadget containing such handy implements as a corkscrew and a spike for prising stones out of horses' hooves. Until his death in 1917 he was for many years the river keeper on the Middleton Beat of the Test at Longparish, a famous beat on the most famous trout stream in the world. He and his wife, born Jane Mansbridge, brought up a large family in a cottage between branches of the river. In February the water flowed in at the back door and flowed out at the front.

By the time I was a small boy in the 1940s the cottage had quite rightly been pulled down and the story of the family in Longparish had become as much archaeology as history. Box bushes still grew on either side of the former gateway, as they do to this very day, but I did not and could not have grasped their significance. The only Joneses left in the village were a couple of great aunts, and they were half-concealed under their married names. In 1914 the village had been full of Joneses.

We know what the outside of the river keeper's cottage looked like from photographs. As to the interior, there was a ginger rabbit in a case, two black rabbits, a stuffed badger and a stuffed red-legged partridge. One picture from the walls survives, a print of dogs, game and guns framed from a seed catalogue. It belongs to a second cousin who, like me, is one of Alfred's greatgrandchildren. By report there had also been pictures of a coursing meet and a racehorse. Almost certainly the venue of the meet was not many miles from Coate. Had anyone remembered the precise location I would have been spared a lot of futile searching for Alfred's childhood home.

When my grandfather died in 1959 the question of where his father, Alfred Jones, had come from began to exercise me but seemed close to insoluble, thanks as much as anything to the immensely common surname. Yet there were tantalising clues. The

first of these was that old men still alive in Longparish were aware that Alfred had gone on great walks back to his birthplace, taking tea with his mother and sisters on arrival, going down to the pub with his father and brothers in the evening, and trudging back the next day. Given that he took only two days over the journey my surmise was that his original home must have been fairly close, which shows how wrong one can be. It was thirty-five miles away.

The old men did not know where his family home was. All they knew was that he set off periodically in his great nailed boots, up through Harewood Forest, past Faulkner's Down Farm, and 'across the fields' to the Three-legged Cross at Crux Easton. This meant crossing the Bourne, a tributary of the Test, and toiling up a long dip slope of the chalk. The Three-legged Cross was a public house on the road from Andover to Newbury. There he stopped for a pint of beer and some bread and cheese. After that he vanished into the void. As far as village lads in Edwardian England were concerned, the first ten miles or so of his walk would have taken Alfred to the edge of their known world; even if they ever heard the names from him, they were not likely to register small places further than that from Longparish. As late as the 1950s and 1960s the sense of locality was much sharper, and its skirts drawn closer together than now, when some people commute seventy or eighty miles by car every day.

The second clue was my father's memory that before the First World War his own father, one of Alfred's sons, had sometimes gone on the 'football special' from Andover town station to Chiseldon, near Swindon, to see a favourite cousin. She was Beatrice, the daughter of one of Alfred's brothers or sisters, but everything else about her was lost in the mists. In addition my grandfather had talked about Cirencester and Shrivenham; no one has ever discovered why but all these places added up to a direction in which to look for old Jones' haunts. Nevertheless, searching for Joneses is like hunting for a needle in a haystack, with the added embarrassment of finding several needles and not knowing which one is right.

## I

In term-time during the late 1950s I used to go out from Oxford at weekends, bird-watching on the Berkshire Downs. In the long summer vacations, when my friends had gone down from the University and there were few birds about, I was inclined to explore the fringes of Wiltshire, putting on my agricultural historian's hat and looking more broadly at the countryside. I searched in a lot of churchyards for the graves of my ancestors but always in the wrong places; when eventually I was directed to the right parish the gravestone of my great-great grandparents - Alfred's parents - was still standing.

In August 1960 I took myself as far as Coate Water, Swindon, where a little birding could be combined with a first visit to the newly opened Richard Jefferies Museum in his boyhood home at Coate Farmhouse. It is easy to see that this was not a very modern trip because my field notes record a flock of yellow wagtails by the side of Coate Water. There would be no such flock there today.

There is no space here to lament the neglect of the Richard Jefferies Museum - and of Richard Jefferies - by the butchers, bakers and candlestick makers of Swindon. The museum venture started bravely enough, though staffed only by volunteers from the Richard Jefferies Society. That August afternoon in 1960 the person on duty was acting as the first curator. She was a retired school-mistress, tart rather than vinegary, crisp and informed in her opinions, a woman to be approached warily by anyone younger in age. Women like her were intelligent, well-read spinsters from a generation that knew its duty. They often went through life on their own because so many men of their age lay in Flanders fields. They taught those of us in the next generation with a firm, exacting, worthwhile discipline (and I salute their memory).

No one else disturbed the museum on that warm and sticky afternoon. I looked at the Jefferies' manuscripts, examined the alterations to the building that must have taken place since his day, and fell to chatting with this slightly formidable woman. She turned out to be Miss Kathleen Sewell, no less than a second cousin of Richard Jefferies.<sup>2</sup> The faint thought that a brother of Alfred Jones had been a gamekeeper somewhere round here led me to blurt out the question: had she known a Keeper Jones?

Given our surname this question was ridiculous, and would have seemed doubly daft had I known there had been another large family of gamekeepers called Jones in the Swindon district, not related to me at all. Yet the answer came at once, yes, she had known Keeper Jones - the right one, who turned out to have been Alfred's brother, John. He was a nice old man who used to come out of the wood and push her bicycle up Burderop hill.

More followed. The son of this John Jones, known as Jack, was also a gamekeeper and still lived in the cottage at Hodson to which John had come in 1900. It was the very cottage that Richard Jefferies immortalized when describing an earlier inhabitant in *The Gamekeeper at Home*, the classic account of nineteenth-century keeping. I could scarcely wait to get to Hodson and the next Saturday roped in my father and my wife for the drive there.

The cottage lies in a deep wooded dell. It is a small thatched place made of blocks of chalk rock, which is the hardest layer from the base of the chalk, not really hard enough for road metal but often used for building in the villages beneath the escarpment of the Vale of White Horse. Chalk rock is light in colour and smooth in appearance. It looks like stone but is altogether more appealing than the Corallian Rag or Cotswold limestone that outcrop a few miles further north. The Hodson cottage bears the date 1741 and is a dream rural retreat.

My father pulled in the car by the hedge. I got out, quickly looked over, and seemed to see my father digging the garden. This was a bit of a shock. Jack Jones, who was doing the digging, was a similar age to my father, then sixty, but because the generations had slipped he was cousin to my grandfather. Jack had followed his own father in keeping on the Calley estate, which included the hamlet of Hodson. His build and stance were remarkably like my father's. Sitting down a few minutes later for a cup of tea with him and his wife the resemblance did tend to retreat a bit. But

none of us needed documents or the tale these Joneses told to believe that Miss Sewell had directed us to the right place.

After an exchange of pleasantries about both branches of the family, we found that Jack remembered Alfred visiting his own parents in this very cottage. He remembered a gruff but not unkindly man and above all he remembered his heavy boots thudding to the floor when he got into bed. How Alfred got to Hodson I do not know, perhaps he too went by train to Chiseldon instead of walking.

Jack Jones continued to live in the Hodson cottage after he retired as gamekeeper on the Burderop estate, until he died in 1989. His wife, Hilda Jones, stayed on almost until her own death, when she was in her nineties. According to the Richard Jefferies Society Newsletter, 'they were most hospitable to visitors from our Society. They allowed us to see around their home, and to have readings in the sitting-room.' The Society's gratitude was marked by gifts of books, for instance in May, 1979, an inscribed copy of Edward Thomas, *Richard Jefferies* (London: Faber Paperbacks, 1978) was presented to them. This copy has been kindly passed on to me by their son and daughter-in-law. An excellent photograph of the cottage figures on the front cover and is wrapped around the spine onto the back cover.

The Beatrice my grandfather used to visit was Jack's sister. Two of her sons were still living as late as 2000 and when eventually I met them in that year the elder recalled Alfred's visits. I should have made the effort to find them earlier, a lament to be carved on every family historian's heart. When I called unannounced at their farm in Wanborough, outside Swindon, the two old men were busy. The eighty-three year-old was cutting the binder twine that held bales of hay in black plastic bags. The ninety year-old was driving a tractor with a great spike on the front like a giant rhinoceros, which he rammed into one bale after the other, to carry it off for feeding their store cattle.

I taxed them with questions about the family and they answered politely without in the least pausing in their work. They were interested in their own generation and their parents and grandparents, people they had known. Their interests were horizontal rather than vertical, meaning they had frustratingly little interest in and very little to say about earlier generations. The village schools they had gone to would have been good at inculcating the four Rs of reading 'riting, 'rithmetic and religion, but otherwise were efficient killers of curiosity about matters of no seeming practical value. I soon made my excuses and slipped away, lest I be given some job about the yard that a ninety-year-old could do better.

The eighty-three year-old did say that he remembered his grandfather, John, every day of his life, which was like the love and veneration my father felt for Alfred. Both gamekeeper brothers must have had considerable presence, which is what family stories and the Longparish elders confirmed about Alfred. We even have a little literary testimony about John, which is unusual for someone of his class. The reason for this is that an American painter called Kate Tryon read Richard Jefferies' books and fell in love with them. About 1911 she came on a visit to the district around Swindon, which was already known as Jefferies Land. She painted many of the scenes



and wrote a long, plain account of her explorations which remains in manuscript in Richard Jefferies Society's ownership. In it she recounts visits to the Hodson cottage, which she painted although - astonishingly - it was too neat and scarcely picturesque enough for her taste. She describes meeting Keeper John, to the extent of representing a few utterances in print. One can hear the gruff Wessex voice down the years.

Almost immediately after Kate Tryon's visit to the Hodson cottage, the Swindon 'hammerman-poet', Alfred Williams, had come calling. Williams was a more prosaic writer than Jefferies but had exceptional achievements for a worker in the railway workshops at Swindon. He wrote poetry, made an important collection of folk songs, and taught himself Sanskrit. As his surname suggests he was one of the many people of Welsh descent who, century after century, have been drawn into North Wiltshire by the droving trade, the cloth industry, and the work offered by the GWR, God's Wonderful Railway.<sup>3</sup> Working in the railway shops was not tender employment for a poet. I am afraid that a relative of Alfred Jones's wife, Albert Mansbridge, founder of the Workers' Educational Association, raised and then dashed Alfred Williams' hopes of some help.<sup>4</sup> Williams never did give poverty the slip until the tuberculosis that had killed Jefferies carried him off too.

Alfred Williams wrote books on local topography based on knowledge acquired by cycling around and talking to village people. They were more likely to open up to him than to literary figures like Edward Thomas, who also came to visit at the same period, collecting material for his biography of Richard Jefferies. At Hodson, Williams met John Jones: 'The gamekeeper is shortish in stature, with a square face, ruddy cheeks, iron-grey hair, and side beard, pleasant and courteous in manner, and abounding with knowledge of wild life.'<sup>5</sup> Williams describes the cottage just before the First World War as almost unchanged since the 1860s, when Jefferies visited the Haylocks there. The contents were like those at Longparish.<sup>6</sup> On a side-table and chest-of-drawers were cases of stuffed birds, including hawfinch, golden plover and some whose identity is unclear.

My sideways connection with the Hodson Joneses was therefore interesting but not what interested me most. These Joneses were a branch of the family tree rather than the trunk. I wanted to know where the tree had stood. When I asked Jack Jones on my first visit to Hodson, he looked up and answered as if I should have known: they came from Red Barn, Ashbury.

## II

From that information, much ensued. The family tree gradually revealed itself, back to the arrival of the Joneses at Mildenhall in the 1530s, and if one believes the Welsh genealogies, way back on the female side to the forebears of the Conqueror. We have been tumbling down the social scale ever since.<sup>7</sup>

This is not the place to go into all the coincidences involved in finding out my family history. They include discovering that my oldest Australian friend, Michael Tarrant, is the three-greats grandson of one of a gang of poaching brothers transported for thieving chicken and a pheasant just in Berkshire at Ashbury, in 1818. The chicken

even belonged to the four-greats uncle of an old friend of mine, Tom Arkell. My three-greats grandfather was one of those who hid in the hedge and jumped out at the Tarrant gang! He was Alfred Jones's grandfather and a keeper on the Craven estate at Ashdown, as were members of the family in successive generations.

Alfred was born at Bishopstone Field, Wiltshire, in December 1848, only one month after Richard Jefferies was born five miles away at Coate. Bishopstone, bang up against the county boundary, seems to have been the eastern limit of Jefferies' stamping ground. When he was living with John Woolford of Snodshill Farm he declined a specific invitation to visit Ashdown and I cannot find that he actually crossed the county boundary in that vicinity.<sup>8</sup>

Gamekeepers were often moved around, as village policemen came to be, to stop them making close local ties. The censuses show the Joneses hopping from place to place across Craven land, mostly in Berkshire, where it formed the largest estate in the 1870s. There were really two lines of Ashbury Joneses. One of them was the carpenter side, like Henry Jones who made the 'cheeses' (they had become wooden wheels) for the race at the Scouring of the White Horse made famous by Thomas Hughes, and whose descendant founded a building firm that put up part of Heathrow.<sup>9</sup> The other side kept up the gamekeeping tradition and it was as keepers they lived for seventy or more years at Red Barn, though Alfred was the last gamekeeper in my immediate line.

Like the old Jones's house at Longparish, the pair of cottages at Red Barn has gone now and the site is marked only by a handful of horse chestnuts and box trees. I believe Alfred fetched from here the cuttings that grew into the box bushes by his gate at Longparish. In the 1960s Red Barn still stood, built of sarsen, which is plentiful thereabouts, with brick surrounds to doors and windows, and a cat-slide roof of tile. It was an attractive eighteenth-century sort of building. The site was an old one, occupied since the middle ages if not before, and isolated near the northern end of the Ashdown woods, altogether a suitable place for gamekeepers and shepherds.

Various neighbours at Red Barn were interesting. One family of shepherds called Hamblin made a go of emigrating to the United States. Another family called Eustace emigrated to Australia. At the time of Alfred's birth, Lord Craven's head keeper was a John Eustace. His daughter married a farmer's son called Withers, from Bailey Hill Farm, Baydon, four miles away across the downs. They went to Australia and ran a sheep station near Chiltern in northern Victoria. Eustace's son, Alfred William Eustace, followed them and worked as a shepherd on the station. He took up painting on gum leaves, presumably for lack of access to other materials in what Australians call the bush.

Gum-leaf paintings sound kitsch but aren't necessarily. The leaves of one species of eucalypt are quite big and the paintings, which I have seen at Chiltern, are accomplished. Young Eustace, who was the literary type (he wrote poetry and was probably at odds with his father), graduated to painting large canvases and is represented in the National Gallery of Victoria. I believe that Alfred (William) Jones was named after Alfred William Eustace as a courtesy, swanking with two first names being otherwise unknown in the family at that period. Young Eustace had two names

to offer only because his father liked Alfred and his mother liked William, and neither would give way.

### III

Once I knew that Alfred Jones's home village had been Ashbury, I could deduce his route beyond the point where he had disappeared at Three-legged Cross. It is surmise, but for topographical reasons probably quite sound. Any countryman would have skirted Ashmansworth and turned along the escarpment from Crux Easton towards Walbury Hill, the highest point on the chalk in England. That would have kept him dry shod as long as possible, unlike now when the track is rutted and dangerous to walk, despite being signed as part of an official long-distance path called the Test Way.

From Walbury, the natural route runs down the escarpment and through the wooded clay country near Inkpen, until it comes out on Port Down, Hungerford. The obvious place to bridge the River Kennet was Hungerford, after which a multiplicity of lanes runs in a northerly direction up another dip slope, until the land falls towards the valley of the little chalk stream at Lambourn. There is no way of knowing exactly which lane Alfred took; maybe not the same one every time. This stretch of the route crosses an assarted area, that is to say one cleared of woodland on the clay capping over the chalk, as bracken in the field banks suggests. Alfred would have kept a little west of Lambourn, the route becoming obvious thereabouts, rising up across what are now gallops to the southern end of the Ashdown woods. The final section runs along the woods, past the earthwork 'castle' named after a much earlier Alfred, and out into open country just south of the Ridgeway for the few hundred yards to Red Barn.

The walk makes a useful transect across part of southern England, crossing several topographical features and geological formations. If one sticks to the route and does not dodge about very far, it provides a fair way of assessing what is happening to the countryside. While the entire route is not known precisely, it is known well enough to sample much the same ecological units each time, as well as indicating how much building is going on. I have been following it twice a year ever since Patrick Dillon and I thought of doing so in the 1980s, although I usually go by car and walk only the unpaved sections. I am not eager to walk along the sealed lanes, where vehicles come racing by.

Perhaps unexpectedly, the walk is at least as much of a gamekeeper's walk as it was when Alfred did it in the 50 years after 1865 - the 'Age of the Pheasant'. A noticeable feature is that the countryside today is becoming more, not less, an elite leisure park, kept for shooting pheasants and the depasturing of riding horses. Another feature that has become noticeable these past 25 years is how suburban-smart the villages are becoming. Hanging baskets of garden centre flowers are one aspect of this, Mercedes and BMWs driven too fast down narrow lanes are another. No children play outdoors, as village children did as late as the 1950s, but then there are not many village children as such any longer. When Alfred was walking this was a busy countryside,

despite the late nineteenth-century depression. There were then lots of people working in the fields and woods, and the village streets were noisy with children.

People say that research is narrowing. 'More and more about less and less', is what is said. It is piffle, of course, from the mouths of those who have never completed a doctoral thesis. Research almost always obliges one to investigate extra topics to understand the main theme. Retracing Alfred's walk is a monitoring exercise, admittedly with no particular hypothesis, but it leads into learning about geology and scenery, about rural history and sociology, and about as many branches of natural history as one can manage.

The cultural landscape in the vicinity of the walk is outstanding too. The literary associations are dense. At or near the northern end we have Richard Jefferies (*primus inter pares*), as well as Alfred Williams, Thomas Hughes, Nassau Senior (the classical economist who married into the Hughes' family), Thomas Hardy (who wrote about the Berkshire Downs from which his mother's family came), Edward Thomas, and (stretching a point) Daines Barrington from Shrivenham, to whom Gilbert White addressed half the letters that make up *The Natural History of Selborne*. Half way along the route, there was Edward Lisle (*Observations in Husbandry*) at Crux Easton, and, if you wish, Alexander Pope serenading Lisle's daughters in the grotto there.

At the southern end, Hampshire can boast Jane Austen, Gilbert White's diarist brother, Henry, Thomas Hardy writing about Weyhill Fair, and William Cobbett excoriating everybody. Cobbett's friend, 'Orator' Hunt, who wrote his autobiography in Ilchester Gaol, once lived in Longparish. So did that other master of bombast, Col. Peter Hawker ('Butcher' Hawker), the 'father of English wildfowling', whose incongruously delicate watercolours decorate his game books in the Beineke Library at Yale. W H Hudson, wrote *inter alia* about Harewood Forest, while innumerable fly fishermen praised their own prowess and Alfred's well-kept Middleton Beat. George Dewar wrote *Life in the Hampshire Highlands* and other works of local natural history. I can find you archaeologist-writers too, like O G S Crawford from East Woodhay, below Walbury, and J P Williams-Freeman, the Weyhill physician who coined the word 'field-archaeology'. On the other hand, there are oddly few painters - they clustered in the Weald - and only one noteworthy musician, Gerald Finzi at Ashmansworth.

There is no suggestion that my ancestor was interested in any of these people, except presumably the fishermen. The literacy of a keeper's son was not great. Jefferies implies that it was just enough to spell out the racing news. While Alfred's wife was recording births and marriages in the family bible, he was no doubt ensconced in 'The Plough' at Longparish, where he long had what was considered to be 'his' chair. His real skills related to the outdoors. Like Haylock, in Jefferies' account, he was fit but became slightly hunched as he aged. Family photographs show that. He was fit enough in his last years to walk 35 miles two days following. The Victorians were in any case great walkers and notes of much longer walks than Alfred's abound in the literature. Jefferies says that keepers walked ten or twelve miles

daily about their ordinary business. There is no better source than *The Gamekeeper at Home* for finding out what that was.

2 August 2007

## References

1. The title is that of a talk I gave to the Society at Ashbury on 26 June 1993; the present article develops the theme on the basis of later findings.
2. Her grandmother was Jefferies' aunt Martha, sister of his father, James Luckett Jefferies. Miss Sewell died in 1965. The Richard Jefferies Newssheet for September 1965 says that 'it was usual to refer to Miss Sewell all questions where uncertainty arose with regard to Jefferies' life and family matters, to be met with authoritative assurances ...' And not only Jefferies' family.
3. My own ancestors had come for another reason: to rent from the Hungerfords the farm and rabbit warren at Woodlands, Mildenhall.
4. Leonard Clark, *Alfred Williams: His Life and Work* (Bristol: William George's Sons, 1945), pp 39-40.
5. Alfred Williams, *Villages of the White Horse* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1913), p 81.
6. Alfred Williams reported that in a poor man's cottage, 'what is lacking in furniture is made up for in pictures and ornaments.' *Round About Middle Thames* (Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1982), p 89.
7. I am writing a book about this, provisionally called *Tumbledown People*.
8. Samuel J Looker and Crichton Porteous, *Richard Jefferies: Man of the Fields* (London: John Baker, 1964), p 74.
9. Thomas Hughes, *The Scouring of the White Horse* (London: Macmillan, 1892); Alfred Williams, *Villages of the White Horse*, op. cit. p 275.

# The Birds in *Bevis*

Michael Taylor

"Bevis, tired of chopping, rolled over on his back on the grass, looking up at the sky. The buttercups rose high above his head, the wind blew and cooled his heated forehead, and a humble-bee hummed along: borne by the breeze from the grass there came the sweet scent of green things growing in the sunshine. Far up he saw the swallows climbing in the air; they climbed a good way almost straight up, and then suddenly came slanting down again, (p 38)"

Richard Jefferies' incomparable book *Bevis: The Story of a Boy* has many passages like that one. A country scene, with birds in it, is vividly described, but there is much more; the boy's mood is captured, and the last sentence illustrates how Jefferies regularly invites his readers to accompany Bevis in observing nature. It was points like these which drew me to *Bevis* when I read the story at the age of ten or twelve and found it magical. Sixty years later, the experience of encountering Richard Jefferies stands out as having opened the door to my personal enjoyment of literature.

John Savage in his Birthday Lecture to the Society, The Art and Craft of Richard Jefferies' (RJS Journal, No 10, 2001), puts it very well: 'One of the best features of the book is the attention to detail, both of the boys' activity and of the natural world.' He goes on to say 'the most interesting, if not astonishing feature is the way the narrative is interspersed with observations of nature.' Further, these are 'as much a part of the narrative as Bevis and Mark: the natural world as hero, with what Laurie Lee marvellously called "Season and landscape's liturgy" as the book's main structure.' I heartily agree.

Issue No 10 of the RJS Journal also contains 'Jefferies and Birds' - the text of a talk given by W J Keith in 1998. This fine article draws widely on letters, essays and books - especially *The Gamekeeper at Home* and *Wild life in a Southern County* - to focus on Jefferies' practical knowledge of his home territory. Among topics considered are the extent to which Jefferies was able to make use of guide books and the knowledge of fellow naturalists to supplement his own observations, and the changes in bird-life that have occurred in the past 150 years. The uncertainties posed by changes in the popular names of various birds since the Victorian age are also examined, for example whether stonechat or whinchat is implied by 'furze-chat' which appears in *Bevis* (p 412) and elsewhere in Jefferies' writings.

The chief object of the present article is to identify the birds which occur in Jefferies' classic. A second purpose is to celebrate *Bevis* from my stance as a keen bird-watcher and dedicated amateur ornithologist (I admit to both these labels). To this end, a number of passages here illustrate the features which make the book so appealing.

By my reckoning, close to sixty different bird species make upwards of 160 appearances in *Bevis* which is a remarkable score. The accompanying List expands

this information to show the wide variety involved. It would challenge today's ornithologists to find some of the birds alluded to by Jefferies that were regular inhabitants of Wiltshire, and Coate Farm in particular, during his lifetime.

The adventures of Bevis and Mark take place around their New Sea (Coate Reservoir) and therefore it is not surprising that water birds figure prominently, with at least five mentions of coot and wild duck, four of dabchick, three of kingfisher, several of gulls and terns, and seven each of heron and moorhen (or moorcock). 'Moorhen' incidentally is derived from 'merehen' and hence the title is not associated with moorland, though this point did not trouble me in nest searches during my Yorkshire boyhood when we called them simply 'waterhens'. The first scene involving these birds is in Chapter III, The Mississippi. This episode, where the spaniel Pan disturbs a family with young birds and has to be forcibly restrained, is crucial in revealing the tender side of Bevis's character: 'They are such pretty dear little things,' said Bevis, ...calling to Mark. . . . 'Don't you love them?' said Bevis. 'I do. I'll *smash* you' - to Pan, cowering at his feet.' (p 45)

Other birds soon come into the picture: 'Out flew a little bird from the shore, startled as Pan came near, with a piping whistle, and, describing a semicircle, returned to the hard mud fifty yards further on. It was a summer snipe, and when they approached, after getting over the next railings, it flew out again over the water, and making another half-circle passed back to where they had first seen it.' (p 56) Here the 'summer snipe' can be recognised as a common sandpiper from its behaviour. In this lovely scene the inclusion of 'after getting over the next railings' - which might be regarded as spurious detail - is a touch of pure Jefferies.

The typical summer migrants feature in *Bevis*: swallows on eight or more occasions, swifts twice, sand-martins twice and 'martins' once. These martins are 'under the eaves' so they are certain to be house martins. The passage concerned (p 367) demonstrates Jefferies going out of his way to inform his readers. It opens: The moment man takes up his residence all the creatures of the wood throng round him, attracted by the crumbs from his hand, or the spoil that his labour affords.' Beginning with 'Hawks dart down on his poultry' he names no fewer than twelve birds amongst an assortment of creatures, some passive, like the martins, or beneficial but others not ('spiders for the flies, flies for the sugar'). He notes pests such as 'rabbits in the garden among the potatoes' and adds 'tomtits take the very bees even'. Nowadays, of course, people purchase choice bird-seed and stock elaborate feeders to attract, beside tomtits, scarcer birds that once were taken for granted. How times have changed!

Among birds much commoner then than now, larks and yellowhammers each make at least five appearances. *Bevis* makes poignant reading because these birds that used to be a familiar presence in the countryside have eluded me during recent travels through Britain. Jefferies' selection of birds reflects other changes: rooks are mentioned at least five times and jays four, but magpies only twice. The note of a hooded crow is odd and perhaps a rare instance of the author going too far in search of colour: 'Another sandbank some way on the left they named Grey Crow island,

because a grey or hooded crow rose from it.' (p 278) 'Jefferies and Birds' (cited above) draws attention to this anomaly, pointing out that Bevis and Mark are building their hut in the summer when they would be unlikely to see any hooded crows and has linked this mention in *Bevis* to a remark by Jefferies in a letter to the *Swindon Advertiser* in which he speculates whether these are the 'to me, strange birds visiting the reservoir here last winter.'

There were other birds with which Jefferies was not familiar. He brings the dabchick or 'lesser grebe' into *Bevis* but seems not to have known the great crested grebe - one species which has expanded its range and occupied Coate Reservoir since the 19th century, while many birds of specialised habitat have declined. Sometimes Jefferies confers his knowledge, or lack of it, on to Bevis and Mark, as in relation to the bearded tit: 'Without wading-boots it was impossible to penetrate the swamp,... It would have been the very haunt of the bearded-tit had not that curiously-marked bird been extinct on the shores of the New Sea. They had never even heard of the bearded-tit, so completely had it died out there.' (p 452)

Bevis and Mark enjoy a long holiday and the birds of summer have their natural place in the story: the cuckoo, corncrake, and fern-owl (nightjar), the turtle dove ('the voice of the turtle' which heralds the season with its onomatopoeic cooing), the nightingale, the whitethroat and the chiff-chaff. They even know the butcher bird - the red-backed shrike - a bird I long to encounter in the British Isles (but have seen only in Hong Kong at the eastern limit of its range). The nightingale is mentioned three times in *Bevis*. A lesser writer might have invoked nightingales to serenade Bevis in his tent on the island of New Formosa, but not Jefferies who brings in the bird as follows: 'From under a bower of wild hops, where they were smothering a bramble bush, a nightingale "kurred" at him angrily. He came near the nightingale's young brood, safely reared. "Sweet kur-r-r!" The bird did not like it. *These wild hops are a favourite cover with nightingales.*' (p 336)

Notice how that passage ends with one of the educational asides (here italicised) which are part and parcel of Jefferies' approach to his readers. There are many others; for instance, when the boys' attention is caught by a small flock of terns:

There's a sea-swallow.' There's two.' There's four or five.' The white sea-swallows passed them, going down the water, coming from the south.

*They flew a few yards above the surface, in an irregular line - an easy flight, so easy they scarcely seemed to know where each flap of the wing would carry them.*

'There will be a storm.' 'A tornado.' 'Not yet - the sky's clear.' 'But we must keep a watch, and be careful how we sail on the raft.'

*The appearance of the sea-swallow or tern in inland waters is believed, like that of the gull, to indicate tempest, though the sea-swallows usually come in the finest of weather.*

Or again: 'The hazel bushes seemed quite vacant; only one bird passed while they were there, and that was a robin, come to see what they were doing, and if there was



anything for him . . . *Nothing happens in the fields and woods without a robin.*' (p 420)

Jefferies was willing to go to considerable lengths to explain an aspect of country lore which he evidently regarded as important. Take the passage in Chapter XLII, New Formosa - The Mainland, where Bevis hears and finally manages to see a small woodpecker. 'Half an hour afterwards there came a sound like "top-top" from an oak on his left hand ... he followed up all the branches of the oak cautiously till he found the bird.' Jefferies then explains how an observer should allow his sight to travel branch by bough through the canopy, before continuing: 'Still he [Bevis] could not find it, though he heard the "top-top". But as he had now got the map of the tree in his eye, the moment the bird moved he saw it.' (p 412) Interestingly, 'the bird was no bigger than a sparrow' which means it was a lesser spotted woodpecker. These are elusive birds and I find myself - not for the first time - envious of Bevis! And although egg collecting is now, of course, an illegal activity I feel empathy with Bevis on reading: '... in his best hat were three corncrake's eggs, blown of course, and put there for safety, as he never wore it.' (p 224)

Exploring the New Sea the two boys bring not only the landscape features, which Bevis draws on his map, but also the wild creatures that they encounter into their world of make believe:

'Parrots,' said Mark, as two wood-pigeons passed over, (p 296)

Pan rushed before and disappeared in the bramble bushes, startling a pair of turtle-doves from a hawthorn. 'Parakeets,' said Mark. They're smaller than parrots.' (p 301)

'Yellow-hammers,' said Bevis, turning to his journal again, 'what are yellow-hammers?'

'Unknown birds,' said Mark. 'We don't know half the birds - nobody has ever put a name to them, nobody has ever seen them: call them, let's see - gold-dust birds - '

'And green-finches?'

'Ky-wee - Ky-wee,' said Mark, imitating the green-finches' call.'

'That will do capital - Ky-wees,' said Bevis.

'There's a horse-matcher here,' said Mark. The horse-matcher is the bold hedge-hawk or butcher bird. [Another of Jefferies' characteristic asides.]

'The one that sticks the humble bees on the thorns.'

'Bee-stickers - no, bee-killers: that's down.' said Bevis. Beside which he wrote down nettle creepers (white-throats), goldfinch, magpie, chaffinch, tree-climber, kestrel-hawk, linnets, starlings, parrots and parakeets, (p 392)

*Bevis* is a long book of 52 chapters and over 500 pages. It has a coda of three chapters set around the turn of the year. 'So they passed October, sometimes seeing a snipe on a sandy shallow of the brook under a willow as they came round a bend. The wild-fowl began to come to the New Sea, but these were older and wiser, and not easy to shoot.' (p 492) Winter migrants now have a place in the story: 'Upon the tops of the elms the redwings sat - high-flying thrushes with a speck of blood under each wing - and called "kuck - quck" as they approached.' (p 492) The mysterious wave that the boys had sometimes seen is resolved: 'One day as they were out rowing in the *Pinta*

they saw the magic wave, and followed it up, till Mark shot the creature that caused it, and found it to be a large diving bird,' (p 492) W J Keith has linked this to Jefferies' letter (loc. cit.) which records 'Two birds said to be the Great Northern Diver were shot at Coate last year .. !'

Richard Jefferies concludes his narrative in the depth of winter. Again the birds fit into the picture: 'During the frost a blackbird had roosted in a corner of the hut under the rafters; sparrows too had sought its shelter, and wrens and blue-tits had crept into the crevices of the eaves, (p 504) The tailpiece is a small picture of two suitably-garbed figures surveying an ice flow replete with penguins.

The copy of *Bevis* used in preparing this article has illustrations by E H Shepard with evocative captions to his numerous drawings: 'Wood for the swords', 'The willow was obstinate', 'The mast fitted', 'Building the hut', 'He [Pan, the spaniel] looked so odd with the fish in his mouth', are examples. However, a search for any picture with birds present reveals just one or two pictures of Bevis and Mark engaged in shooting, where a few tiny objects, probably pheasants, are vanishing into the distance. One such scene appears on the end-paper and here Bevis is shown firing at ducks from a boat. This end-paper deserves special mention for it depicts the 'Map of the New Sea and the Bevis Country' surrounded by sketches in elementary style, as if drawn by Bevis himself. There is an obvious parallel with the famous pictures in the *Swallows and Amazons* series - supposed to be the work of the children - that were produced by Arthur Ransome, who disliked those by the artist Clifford Webb used in his earliest edition. No doubt Shepard was aware of the fact, mentioned in E V Lucas's Introduction to the illustrated edition, that Jefferies had once told a correspondent 'There is at Coate a reservoir - it is sixty years old, and looks quite as a lake - of some eighty acres of water. I think I could write a whole book on that great pond. I mapped it, and laid down the shallows and sandbanks, when I was a schoolboy, and I learnt how to manage a sailing-boat on it.' A related point concerns the diagram on page 46 labelled 'Coate Farm 1880'. Was this intended to echo the publication year of *Bevis* or was Shepard, for authenticity, working from a drawing or photograph of that date? Any reading of *Bevis* prompts questions and it might be instructive to examine the work of contemporary authors of adult and children's books - individuals with more than a passing interest in birds, such as Penelope Lively or Margaret Atwood - if only to underline how far apart Richard Jefferies with *Bevis* stands from other major writers in respect of my topic.

*'Bevis' was published in 1882. Page numbers refer to the New Illustrated Edition (Jonathan Cape, 1932, reprinted 1943, third impression 1948).*

### Birds that appear in *Bevis*.

At least sixty different bird species make upward of 160 appearances in *Bevis*. Where the name employed by Jefferies differs from today's usage the present name is given in brackets, e.g. Fern-owl (Nightjar). When a species is

mentioned more than once, the number of times it occurs in *Bevis* is shown in square brackets.

Blackbird [5], Black-headed Bunting (Reed Bunting), Blue Tit or Tomtit [3], Bullfinch [2], Butcher-bird or Hedge-hawk (Red-backed Shrike). Chiff-chaff, Coot [5], Corncrake [2], Crow (Carrion Crow) [2], Cuckoo Dabchick or Lesser-grebe [3], Diver (referred to as a large diving bird and linked to a record of a Great Northern Diver at Coate), Dove [4], Duck (or 'wild duck' - probably Mallard) [5]  
Fern-owl (Nightjar), Fieldfare, Finch (probably Chaffinch), Furze-chat (Stonechat or Whinchat)  
Goldfinch [2], Greenfinch [2], Grey or Hooded Crow, Gull (referred to as a 'white sea-gull' - perhaps Black-headed Gull)  
Hawk (probably Sparrowhawk) [2], Heron [7]  
Jay [4]  
Kestrel (or Kestrel-hawk), Kingfisher [3]  
Lark (Skylark) [5], Linnet  
Magpie [2], Martin (Housemartin), Missel Thrush, Moorhen & Moorcock [7]  
Nightingale [3]  
Owl (Tawny Owl) [3]  
Partridge [2], Peewit (Lapwing) [2], Pheasant [5]  
Redwing, Robin [3], Rook [5]  
Sand-martin [2], Sea-swallow (Common Tern), Sedge-bird (Sedge Warbler), Snipe, Sparrow (House Sparrow) [5], Spotted Woodpecker (Lesser Spotted Woodpecker), Starling [6], Summer Snipe (Common Sandpiper) [2], Swan, Swallow [8], Swift [2]  
Thrush (Song Thrush) [4], Tree-climber (Tree Creeper), Turtle Dove [2]  
Wagtail (either Pied Wagtail or Grey Wagtail) [2], Whitethroat, Wren [2]  
Yellowhammer [5]

# Richard Jefferies and the Classics

*Andrew Rossabi*

From first to last Jefferies' writings are filled with references to the classics. In an early article he compared the Swindon works to the Cyclops' cave, the cave under Mount Etna where the one-eyed giants helped the blacksmith god Hephrastus forge the thunderbolts that Zeus was wont to hurl at errant mortals; and likened the cross-section of the broad-gauge rail to the Greek letter omega  $\Omega$ . The last book he published in his lifetime was named after a shepherdess who was a stock character in Greek and Roman pastoral poetry, as in Virgil's first eclogue

Tu, Tityre, lentus in umbra  
formosam resonare doces Amaryllida silvas.  
Relaxing in the shade, Tityrus,  
you teach the woods to echo 'beautiful Amaryllis'.

The *Amaryllidaceae* is the botanical name of a large family of flowers which include the daffodil that features prominently in the opening chapter of the novel. Its epigraph was taken from a drinking-song by Alcaeus, a Greek poet of the 7th-century BC: 'Our day is but a finger: bring large cups.'

Both the closing words of Jefferies' last essay 'My Old Village' ('Perhaps ... I shall find out . . . when I pass away physically, that as a matter of fact there never was any earth') and the final entry in his notebooks ('I dream of Ideality') have a strong Platonic tinge. Plato was an idealist philosopher who believed that the physical world perceived by the senses was a sham, a mere shadow-play, and the real world of timeless forms could only be perceived by the mind and intelligence (*nous*).

Jefferies wasn't alone. It's no exaggeration to say that the Victorians were in thrall to the classics, to the Greeks especially. Byron, Shelley, Matthew Arnold, Disraeli, Gladstone, Tennyson, Ruskin, George Eliot, Swinburne, Pater, Wilde, Hopkins and Hardy were among those profoundly influenced by the ancient authors.

Richard Jenkyns in *The Victorians and Ancient Greece* (1980) suggests that in an increasingly industrialized and science-dominated world, where the old religious certainties had been replaced by doubt, and the sense of beauty and awe they once inspired was fading, antiquity provided new saints and new ideals. Jenkyns notes how the Victorians generally tended to romanticize and idealize the classical past. Jefferies certainly did.

A classical education was the hallmark of a gentleman (both George Eliot and Virginia Woolf complained that the classics were an almost exclusively male preserve). Classics were at the core of the public-school curriculum. Between the ages of 13 and 18 most boys studied almost nothing but Latin, Greek and Ancient History. In *Tom Brown's Schooldays* the *casus belli* for the fight between Tom and Slogger Williams is that Arthur, the new boy whom Tom has been deputed to look after, bursts

into tears while translating Helen's affecting lament over the dead Hector in Homer's *Iliad*. Williams jeers at Arthur; Tom rushes to his defence; and the scene is set for a Rugbeian version of a Homeric combat. The heroic ideals of Homer's poems underpinned the ethos of public-school life. The other chief model was the severe Spartan system.

Which brings me to the subject of Jefferies' schooling. In a letter of 1886 to publisher George Bentley Jefferies says he learned Latin and Greek 'in the usual manner'. He repeats the claim in the essay 'Nature and Books'. I suspect this is a gloss on what was an irregular education which ended when Jefferies was about 15. Victorian society was rigidly hierarchical and acutely class-conscious so it is understandable that Jefferies was concerned to present himself in the best light. I'm not for a moment suggesting that he didn't study Latin and Greek but the phrase 'in the usual manner' rather implies that he had had a normal classical education, i.e. a public-school one. I may be doing Jefferies an injustice but my guess is that he received only a smattering of instruction in the actual languages, and that his knowledge of the classics (which was considerable and would have put many public-school boys and even some university men to shame) was largely the result of self-education. One thing is for sure: there's little evidence of the influence of the languages in Jefferies' prose style, a wonderfully fluent Anglo-Saxon, mercifully free of ponderous Latinisms.

That Jefferies was for the most part self-educated in the classics is confirmed by a passage in 'Nature and Books', where he explicitly states that he read them in translation, from about the age of 18. He mentions Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of the Philosophers*; Plato; Xenophon's memoirs of Socrates; Sophocles' tragedies; and Athenaeus, 'that wonderful encyclopaedia of curious things'.

The hero of the early novel *World's End* has much in common with his creator, being a cuckoo in the nest of rural society. Scholar and aesthete, Aymer Malet is in love with beauty and learning. Unable to afford books, he wires game, sells it to the carriers who cross the downs and so slowly acquires a library of Bohn's translations, which he calls 'the finest and most useful [series of books] perhaps ever issued'. The story, whether or not based on fact, points to Jefferies' determination to familiarise himself with the classics, a desire he shared with those other provincial autodidacts, Thomas Hardy of Higher Bockhampton and Alfred Williams of South Marston. Williams' case is especially moving. At the same time as working a nine-hour day as a hammerman in the Swindon works he taught himself Latin, Greek and Sanskrit. In spite of the opposition of factory officials and the sneers of workmates he'd chalk a Greek word on the toe-cap of his boot or the back of his steamhammer to help memorize it.

The first classical work to have impacted on the young Jefferies was Homer's *Odyssey*. Jefferies says it was his father and not the schoolmaster who introduced him to Homer: 'without him I should never have appreciated the *Odyssey*'. In *The Amateur Poacher* he declares that 'Ulysses [the Roman name for Odysseus] was ever my pattern and model: that man of infinite patience and resource'. He read the *Odyssey* in

Pope's translation, of which the scholar Richard Bentley famously remarked, 'A very pretty poem, Mr Pope, but you mustn't call it Homer'.

The epic describes the hero's adventures on his way home from Troy to Ithaca, where his wife Penelope loyally waits for him though beset by suitors wanting to marry her. The siege of Troy has lasted 10 years and it takes Odysseus another 10 to reach Ithaca. The dangers he faces and surmounts include the Cyclops Polyphemus; the she-monster Scylla; the whirlpool Charybdis; the Sirens who lure sailors to their doom by their beautiful song; the nymph Calypso who falls in love with him and detains him on her island for seven years; the Lotus-eaters; the cannibalistic Laestrygonians; and the witch Circe who changes his men into swine. Odysseus even has to make a journey down into the underworld, the realm of the dead, to consult the blind prophet Teiresias. He endures much but never gives up. He is, as Jefferies states, a man of infinite patience and resource. Homer's epithets for him are 'much-enduring' (*polytlas*) and 'crafty' (*polymetis*). The poem can be read as an allegory of our voyage through life: the word *odyssey* has become synonymous with a long and arduous journey.

One imagines that the boy Jefferies responded to the book first because it was an exciting tale, full of adventure and wonders; second because he was attracted to Odysseus' personality, his resourcefulness, his skill in getting out of a tight corner, his restless, questing spirit, qualities that Jefferies himself shared.

The hero's enduring nature must also have appealed to a man who suffered much in his own life and who fought a brave but losing battle against what he called the giants of Disease, Poverty, and Despair.

Next, history. The mock Battle of Pharsalia in *Bevis* is one of the book's set-pieces, in which Bevis, Mark and the local boys re-enact one of the most famous battles in Roman history. A civil-war battle fought in 48 BC, it was a shoot-out between Rome's top two generals, Julius Caesar and Pompey the Great. Caesar had spent the previous nine years conquering Gaul (modern France), which became a province of the Roman Empire. During his early political career, the years of his rise to power, Caesar had committed so many illegalities that he knew he was bound to be prosecuted on his return to Rome. Relations between him and the Senate, the cliquish body of noble families who governed Rome, became so bad that the Senate finally declared him a public enemy. Therefore, instead of disbanding his army before he entered Italy, as he should legally have done, Caesar crossed the little red river Rubicon which marked the border at the head of his army with the words, 'The die is cast!' Ever since 'to cross the Rubicon' has been synonymous with taking a fateful, decisive, irrevocable step.

To counter the threat posed by Caesar, the Senate turned to the other leading general of the day, Pompey the Great, so called because a decade earlier he had conquered vast tracts of the East. Pompey's own career had been marked by much illegality and there was no love lost between him and the Senate, who had refused to grant land to his veterans. But Pompey was jealous of the glory which Caesar had won by his conquest of Gaul and which now rivalled his own. It was nicely said that Caesar couldn't stand a superior, Pompey an equal. After much shilly-shallying, then, Pompey

agreed to lead the senatorial forces. However he was caught napping by Caesar's speed of movement and forced to evacuate Italy and to cross to Greece to assemble his army there. It took Caesar a while to gather a fleet but once he was in Greece a great battle was fought between the two armies on a plain in Thessaly near the city of Pharsalus. Caesar won and so became sole master of the Roman world. He had himself made dictator. We all know what happened next: the Ides of March, 'Et tu, Brute?' and 'Friends, Romans, countrymen'. However, Caesar's assassination solved nothing and merely led to a further round of civil war.

A few points about the boys' re-enactment of the battle. They almost come to blows over settling who is to be Caesar and who Pompey. Significantly Bevis appropriates the part of the victorious Caesar, a man whom we know from *The Story of My Heart* that Jefferies greatly admired, and it's not until the boys agree that Ted in the role of Pompey is to win if he can that the battle is able to go ahead.

The boys' knowledge of ancient history is hazy on some points, but how many children of their age nowadays have even heard of Pharsalia? Crassus, the wealthiest man in Rome, had been dead five years, killed by the Parthians at Carrhae in 53 BC. Scipio, too, belonged to an earlier generation. But too much accuracy would have spoiled the realism. Jefferies after all is drawing a picture of boys at play, not adults re-enacting a battle in, say, the English Civil War. And they get most things right. Bevis knows the correct form of Roman epistolary address (not 'Dear Pompey' but 'Caesar to Pompey greeting'). Again, though Mark is worried because Ted has all the big boys on his side, Bevis remains calm. In fact Pompey's forces heavily outnumbered Caesar's but as in the boys' action-replay Caesar's decisiveness, swiftness of movement and superior strategy overcame the odds.

Now, philosophy. A favourite theme of the Greek philosophers was that the contemplative life was the highest open to man. The belief was shared by Pythagoras, Aristotle and Plotinus. Pythagoras (philosopher as well as mathematician) famously likened life to a festival or fair, to which people came either to compete for glory, to buy and sell for gain, or simply to watch. So in life there were three types of person: some sought fame, others money, but the best were those who spent their lives in the contemplation of nature. These were the lovers of wisdom or philosophers. By contemplation of the order and harmony found in the arrangement of the heavenly bodies, and assimilating himself to that orderliness, the philosopher according to Pythagoras was progressively purified until he escaped the wheel of reincarnation and attained immortality.

The story is told in Diogenes Laertius' *Lives of the Philosophers*, which Jefferies says was the first translation [after the *Odyssey*] he read. The figure of life as a festival may even have been in his mind when he composed the scene of Amaryllys watching the crowds make their way to the Lady-Day fair. But the texts which perhaps best illustrate Jefferies' contemplative nature are the essays 'The Brook' and 'A London Trout' in *Nature Near London*. Jefferies had moved to Tolworth near Surbiton to be closer to his editors in the capital. He was delighted by the variety and richness of bird life found in the suburbs. A regular walk took him to a bridge over the Hogsmill, a

tributary of the Thames which it joined at Kingston. Near the bridge a stagnant, scummy pond was a favourite resort of anglers. The waters of the Hogsmill were pure and clear yet no-one fished there, which Jefferies thought remarkable.

One day Jefferies spied a trout by the tail of the bridge. He took a special interest in preserving the fish. If anyone came along he'd rap the parapet with his stick or raise his hat 'as if heated' to send the trout back under the arch. The erstwhile amateur poacher would probably have found a way to extract the fish. The more mature man reasoned: 'What would be the pleasure of securing him, the fleeting pleasure of an hour, compared to the delight of seeing him almost day by day?' Jefferies watched the fish for four seasons in all. Then the brook was dammed to lay a gas-main and the trout became stranded in a shallow pool. There it was spotted and one Sunday four men waded in armed with an eel-spear. Jefferies could not bear to watch the outcome but never again saw the trout. 'Somehow it [the water] seemed to look colder, darker, less pleasant than it used to do.'

The story can be read as a parable of Jefferies' life, spent in the contemplation of nature, not in the hope of any reward, money or fame, but for its own sake, for the pleasure derived from the simple act of looking, the philosophical ideas born of observation, and the spiritual calm and peace it brought. Jefferies was living out the Greek ideal in Victorian England. The watershed in his work between the sportsman-naturalist and the later, more dispassionate observer is *Nature Near London*. A new spirit is evident in the essays; an eye subtler, more microscopic, more painterly; a vision more tragic and intense. Part of the reason was that Jefferies had again been gravely ill.

The anonymous author - probably Samuel Looker - of 'Jefferies at Goring', the last piece in the Worthing Cavalcade *Tribute* (1946), describes how Mrs Rich, a neighbour who lived in Sea Lane, came to know Jefferies well. One day she found him sitting by the vicarage wall at the corner of Sea Lane. He called her over and spent some time dilating upon the beautiful structure of the ivy covering the wall. As she told the author of the article, I never knew before then that there was so much in an ivy leaf.

Jefferies continued contemplating nature until the end. There are few more poignant passages in his work than that in 'Hours of Spring' where he voices his frustration at being confined indoors during what proved his last illness, while new life was stirring outside after a particularly harsh winter. Even on his death-bed he continued a lifetime's habit of observation: he listened to a wren which visited a bough by his window, watched a lark high in the sky and heard its song through the windowpane. But for the most part he imagined the life being reborn outside his prison, as he termed his room. In a way he didn't need to go outside, because he knew it all by heart, so often had he kept a calendar of the seasons. 'Never was such a worshipper of earth.' Nor in his last agony did he forget the Greeks. As he watched an old man 'over 90' being carted with his possessions to another house - the man's son 'himself old' had been buried the previous Sunday - his thoughts turned to what the Greeks called fate and he 'the tyranny of circumstance, the lot of man'.



The song of the Greeks is full of sorrow; man was to them the creature of grief, yet theirs was the land of violets and pellucid air. This has been a land of frost and snow, and here too, it is the same. A stranger, I see, is already digging the old man's garden.

Jefferies shared the Greeks' tragic vision. 'Not to have been born is by far the best' the chorus sing in Sophocles' play *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Yet finally Jefferies was not a pessimist and his basic optimism comes out in his celebration of Greek sculpture. The sculpture galleries of the British Museum are among the places of pilgrimage mentioned in *The Story of My Heart*. Jefferies doesn't specify which statues - perhaps the Elgin marbles from the Parthenon in Athens - but they gave him a sense of peace. Coming in from the busy streets he was restored to himself after one glance at their shapes. He tells us that the statues produced the same feeling in him as when he was 'lying on the turf listening to the wind among the grass'. It would have seemed to him natural to have found butterflies fluttering among them. 'Wherever there is a beautiful statue there is a place of pilgrimage.'

In 'Nature in the Louvre', an essay posthumously published in *Field and Hedgerow* (1889), Jefferies celebrates a particular statue. The *Venus Accroupie* or Stooping Venus is a Roman copy in marble of a Greek bronze. The title of Venus is conventional: the statue is simply of a woman stooping to take a child pickaback, the child's figure lost but for one hand.

Jefferies was charmed by the statue's naturalism - for example, by the slight swelling of the right thigh caused by the bending of the knee; by the creases and folds in the abdomen. For Jefferies they were so many signs of life. He contrasted them with the smooth torsos of more famous statues like the Venus dei Medici and the Venus de Milo. They presented ideal beauty but didn't live for him like the Stooping Venus. Jefferies found further truth to life in the diamond-shaped flatness on the woman's back, at the base of the mesial groove.

Pondering the reason for the statue's fascination, Jefferies concluded that it was because it reminded him of the loveliness of nature. The statue brought back days spent wandering in the meadows and woods, when he'd felt 'some secret influence' leading him on: 'the light and colour suspended in the summer atmosphere, as colour is in stained but translucent glass, were to me almost on the point of becoming tangible in some beautiful form'. The Venus was 'the human impersonation of the secret influence'. 'She expressed the deep aspiring desire of the soul for the perfection of the frame in which it is encased, for the perfection of its own existence.'

Jefferies drew a distinction between natural beauty and that of art. Nature was beautiful but wasn't for man. It cared nothing for him and was indifferent to his fate. 'For man there is nothing on earth really but man: the human species owns and possesses nothing but its species.' He continued in words which help explain his fascination not only with the beauty of a particular statue but with beauty in general:

When I saw this I turned with threefold concentration of desire and love towards that expression of hope which is called beauty, such as is worked in marble here. For I think beauty is truthfully an expression of hope, and that is why it is so entralling - because

while the heart is absorbed in its contemplation, unconscious but powerful hope is filling the breast. So powerful is it as to banish for the time all care, and to make this life seem the life of the immortals.

*Text of talk given in the Jefferies Museum, Coate, on the Study Day, 28 July 2007.*

# Book Review

RICHARD JEFFERIES AND THE ECOLOGICAL VISION

by Brian Morris. Trafford Publishing, 2006 ISBN 1-4120-9828-9.

As a non-academic enthusiast for the works of Richard Jefferies I found this book compulsive reading. As it was written in a straightforward style I did not have to grapple with difficult terminology, and I learnt a lot.

Brian Morris begins with a potted biography relating this to many of Jefferies' writings with relevant quotations, quite a few from *Bevis*. The book then follows a progression through the many aspects of Jefferies' work: Jefferies as an ethnographer of game keeping, hunting and poaching, and a recorder of natural history and vermin. These chapters are full of quotations from *The Amateur Poacher*, *The Gamekeeper at Home* and *Red Deer*. He then looks at Jefferies' political journalism in connection with the rural economy, the Wiltshire labourer, the future of farming, the tenant farmer, the landlords and the clergy. The quotations here are from collections such as *The Toilers of the Field*, *Landscape and Labour* and *Hodge and His Masters*. A chapter is devoted to Jefferies' agrarian studies written as articles for magazines such as *The Live Stock Journal*, *New Quarterly*, *Fraser's Magazine*, *The Pall Mall Gazette* and *Longman's Magazine* as well as those collected, for example, in *The Hills and the Vale*, *Field and Hedgerow* and *Field and Farm*.

The book then moves on to discuss Jefferies as the prose-poet of nature, looking in particular at *Wild Life in a Southern County*, *Round About a Great Estate*, *Nature Near London*, *The Open Air* and some of the collections already mentioned here in which Jefferies describes his wonder at the sights of nature. As well as evoking his sense of place, Jefferies is interested in the wider landscape and its inhabitants as well as those of the distant past.

There is a chapter about the nine published novels written in the space of thirteen years, some of which are autobiographical. It contains a wealth of discussion including references to critiques and observations by many Jefferies authorities such as W J Keith, Roger Ebbatson, H Carpenter, Jonathan Calder, Edward Thomas, Q D Leavis, John Price, M Satyasree, Henry Salt and Andrew Rossabi.

There follows a presentation of Jefferies as a visionary naturalist with his descriptions conveying 'a sensuous enjoyment of nature', of a world that is 'mystical as well as therapeutic' and of which Walter Besant in his *Eulogy* (1888) says that reading Jefferies teaches us to see the natural world 'with new eyes'. Numerous works are referred to including 'The Pageant of Summer', 'Meadow Thoughts' and his autobiography *The Story of My Heart*. Two chapters are devoted to his nature mysticism and its interpretation containing the positive and negative views of such diverse writers as Henry Williamson and H J Massingham. I have to admit that I found the theories quite difficult to follow. The last part of this section, 'My Old Village', sums up Jefferies' increasing frustration and pessimism near the end of his life.

The penultimate chapter discusses Jefferies as a comprehensive genius, describing the many sides to his writing: the art of seeing, his detachment, and as an ecologist. It is stressed that he was not a scientific observer, but a poet naturalist. There are examples of his writings on mammal and bird life, insects, trees, and wild flowers and how they all relate to each other and humankind - an ecological view. The other side of him, the realist is also studied; his down-to-earth writing through his novels, letters to newspapers and journalism about the agricultural depression of the late 1880s and the conditions of farm workers, in contrast to the Romantics' view of the countryside.

The book finishes with Jefferies and the nature tradition starting with Gilbert White through to the late 19th century 'back to nature' impulse caused by the decline in the countryside, and the English rural tradition, referring to writers such as George Borrow, W H Hudson, Mary Russell Mitford and Thomas Hardy. There is an interesting discussion on Hudson and Jefferies followed by short accounts of George Sturt and H J Massingham. Finally, Brian Morris regrets that although Jefferies aroused the public's awareness of wildlife and ecology, his role is not acknowledged in many histories of ecology. This book is an important step in rectifying the situation.

Out of 460 pages, 68 of these consist of impressive appendices containing a list of books, pamphlets, essays and published letters by Jefferies, books and articles about him and a general bibliography as well as an index. Acknowledgement is given to G Miller and H Matthews for their complete and comprehensive bibliography of Jefferies' works (1993). The book offers a wealth of varied critical opinion by a host of writers with much new thought and critique by himself. In addition, he presents the reader with valuable information about other countryside writers and how their work is similar to or differs from Jefferies'.

I have only two complaints: there are a number of printing 'typos', and the book, due to its size and form, is a little awkward to handle. On the other hand, the print is easy to read.

This work will appeal to all, whether the novice, wanting to learn more or the erudite who will find much of interest. It is a book that everyone who reads Jefferies should have on their shelves because not only is it packed with information but the chapters stand alone and can be referred to or read for their own sake.

*Norma Goodwin*