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Alone in London

Richard Jefferies

Transcribed from an untitled and unpublished MS by Jefferies in the British Library, reference Add. MSS 58817; title supplied by the Editors.

I am the only man in London who is not quite decided. Everyone else has fully made up his mind and knows exactly what he is going to do. They come along the pavement in the Strand, one after the other, thicker than a crowd, for that is all bunched up together, but these march in ceaseless succession hour by hour. They are all going somewhere. All have got something to do. Upon their faces there is a set determination to get there and do it: each pushes past the other. If one hesitates a moment to glance at a window another seizes the opportunity to slip ahead. Someone is always waiting to slip by somebody; someone is always overtaking someone. Very little pushing, no jostling, simply moving on, bent on the execution of the business in hand. Everyone stern, serious, rapt in the duty of hastening onwards.

It makes me feel little. I look in the faces and can get no consolation, for they are all so thoroughly convinced; without a doubt, on they go. They have "learned at the school", they have acquired a fixed knowledge, they have judged this life and the world and are firm of opinion. They know they are right, and that there is nothing else, or more possible, and on they go.

As I walk the pressure of this silent but immense energy around begins to fill me with all manner of difficulties. I came up to Town to purchase a small article in Piccadilly, and it seemed when I started very reasonable to go direct to the warehouse or manufactory for it. But ought I to have come at all? How very little and despicable my paltry object beside this stream of determined people bent on matters of consequence. I ought to have work at home, or I ought to enter an office or go down on the Docks if I can do nothing else and help unload the vessels. Something real, tangible, work in short, to hasten to and fro. To spend the money on a railway ticket was waste: it ought to have been put in the savings bank. I could have walked so short a distance. Had I not better go home as it is, and set to do something? Change my whole life, my whole scheme of existence is wrong. I must do something else, for all these faces are a reproach to me. Here is a portmanteau shop. I will go in and buy an overland trunk and start for India, or better still for Central Africa, and open up new ground. Here is a china shop, could I not invent a new pottery? There would be something in that. Someone would write my life and explain what an extraordinary benefactor I had been, and how the example of my self-denial and perseverance was in itself a gain to the moral universe. Here is a toy shop: perhaps I could make toys; nothing greater surely than to [draw] laughter from children to make thousands

happy. I am drifting west, I ought to face around and start for the city; the warehouse and office of the world and do something. A hundred thousand clerks at this moment are pushing out for dinner; they do not hesitate: they crowd the restaurants and eat heartily, satisfied that they have done a good part and are entitled to this meal. There is no doubt about it. "But you?" says my mental mentor, "You are a detestable being, you have done nothing. You do not even know where you are going. You finger your money in your pocket and you cannot make up your mind whether you ought to buy that little engraving you set your mind on or not. Why don't you go and eat with a hearty goodwill?" "Because I am not hungry," I feebly respond, answering myself. "Then you ought to be. Everybody else is. Look in at that buffet. Listen to the chink of plates. See the waiters rushing. Hearken to the pops of corks. They all know they're hungry. They're all quite certain they're hungry and go and do it. As for you." I shudder at my own sneer at myself, and look again for consolation in the faces that are streaming by.

None whatever. They have no doubt; they are in no difficulty. A set determination is marked on every one; the expression is identical as if they were replicas of the same plaster cast. They all know everything. Each one could tell me what I was made for, what I ought to be doing, resolve for me every question. I can see it in the swing of their coat tails. It is visible in the precision of their neckties. They have all got boots that fit them and they have all got fitted into this society. I cannot understand it. I begin to feel creepy and queer. Something odd about me. Perhaps my trouser ends are frayed, my coat does not sit properly, my hat is tilted a trifle, my pockets bulged out of shape with a newspaper (wish I could throw it away). No one else has got an umbrella but me. I do not like this singularity. I keep running up against people – there again, and now a man has stepped on my heels. What's that boy running for? How he darts in and out and round folk and slips ahead! What's his message; something very special. Come make up your mind.

Rolled along by the current like a log in a shallow stream, I am washed up at last ashore, and take refuge in the niche of a doorway where I can stand flattened against the door and let people go by without getting in their way. That is something at all costs to be out of the way; so delightful to know one is right in something.

T. T. T.

By Richard Jefferies

This was first published in the North Wilts Herald of 2 February 1867 under the pseudonym 'Geoffrey' which Jefferies used for his early fiction. An amended version appeared as a pamphlet which is now very scarce, printed by Arthur Young in 1896. The original NWH text is given here and was published in the Richard Jefferies Society Journal, 1992.

I

One winter afternoon when the sun, taking compassion upon the frost-bound earth, and chilly mortals, deigned to dispel the gray clouds for a while, there stood at the gate of a cottage upon a lonesome country road, two persons, who appeared to be enjoying what little heat the sun shot down, or else awaiting the coming of some one. The cottage, partly concealed by a high hedge of box, the greener from contrast with the bare branched trees and leafless hawthorns lining the opposite side of the road, was low, and the thatched roof nearly approached the ground. The thatch was itself old, dirty coloured, and in many places utterly rotten, covered with great plants of silgreen, and so much vegetation that one might easily imagine an adventurous cow climbing up to literally eat the roof off. The two persons at the gate had an appearance in accordance with their habitation. One was an old woman who might be seventy, might be seven hundred, so uncertain [were] the usual indications of age in her case. On the one hand a thousand wrinkles might give her a claim to an antediluvian age, just as every ring in the trunk of a tree is said [to] betoken a year. On the other a pair of eyes, as small and piercing as a slowworm's, undimmed by so long a succession of light and darkness, seemed to indicate a degree of penetration and a condition of the spark of life not to be expected after so long a period of wear and tear. Though supported by crutches her back formed an angle of forty with the perpendicular, about such a slant as the roof of her cottage, and the resemblance was still further carried out by the drab rags which clothed it, of much the same appearance and colour as the thatch. Near her stood a smaller repetition of herself – a daughter – short, stunted, brown as a berry, inheriting much of the sharp glancing eyes of her mother, and apparently wearing her cast off rags. Both from time to time looked up the road. At length the younger spoke.

"Moder, when 'ull the good lady come?"

"Here she be: run in for the toasting fork!" exclaimed the old crone after a pause, during which the sound of advancing carriage wheels could be [distinctly] heard. Like a leaf whirled by the wind the girl ran in, and came out with a toasting fork, just as the carriage turning a corner became visible.

"Here, let I look 'un" said the old woman. "Be his points scraped clean?"

"Eez, moder."

"Mind yer curtsey then."

The next moment the two magnificent greys that drew the approaching carriage were reined in by the cottage gate, a foot-boy sprang down from behind and opened the door, whence emerged a lady of an uncertain age, say forty in mercy to her memory – and rather stout. The young girl in rags, and the old woman in rags respectfully curtsied, while a gracious smile lit up the visitor's face upon beholding the toasting fork which was held forward for her inspection.

"Well Esther," said she, "I see you have kept the instrument in capital condition – not a speck of rust, that is fatal to its efficacy, nor of dried bread, which has an injurious effect. A clean toasting fork makes clean toast. And how is the rheumatism?"

"Well, mum, 'tis main curis and drives me miserable, as my daughter can tell ye, ma'am, who is going fifteen, and takes to toast natural like."

"Ah, you don't take enough tea, and don't bake your toast brown enough. Nothing like tea and toast for anything."

"Yes, mum, I knows it, mum, as you says it, as is so good and kind if people will but do as you tells 'um and take toast and tea for rheumatism and what not."

"I always tell people to take what is good for them, Esther, and I am glad you see it. Is your tea gone yet?"

"Went this morning, mum."

"Here, Jonas," cried the lady, and the foot-boy started into activity. He had been lolling against the open door, winking hard at John on the box through the glass. "Bring me some tea."

"Toasting fork, mum?" said Jonas, pretending to misunderstand her, and holding up a bundle of the articles which he took from the carriage, in order that a person who was passing might see, and look astonished – which he did rather.

"No – tea."

"Yes, mum," Jonas brought a packet which the old woman received with many expressions of gratitude, and would the lady walk in a minute and sit down, and say a good word or two? The good lady would, and in the trio went.

"I say, John," said Jonas, as the old crone disappeared within bringing up the rear of the procession. "I wonder she don't sell herself for rags and bones!"

"And buy toasting forks!"

"He! he! he! But don't she go it, though our missis, with her toast and tea cure? Sartain sure if she won't kill her da'after, dear Miss Ellen, with stuffing her with toast and drowning her with tea. I seen her this morning and she is as thin as though she were kept upon chips. Missis won't cure her love for Mr Egerton that way."

"No, not likely," replied John, adding in a lower tone, "But how was it as Mr Egerton was forbid the house and Miss Ellen all of a sudden? I thought as the marriage deeds was signed."

“And so ‘um was according to Sal, the chamber maid, only one day Mr Egerton, like a man as sees his lady a being dried up on toast and tea, pitches into missis about it, and ses as tea was rubbish and toast a deception, and goes on against it, which just put missis in a towering passion, and she swears he shant have her daughter, as is insane and says toast and tea be nothin’ good for nobody, and so sends Mr Egerton a packin’, and Miss Ellen, what with disappointment and drivin’ out her lover with a toasting fork as though it were a pitch-fork, mends worse, and is – Lard, here comes missis, and the ould ‘un.”

At that moment the lady re-appeared, and walked rapidly with a smile of no little satisfaction upon her countenance towards the carriage, followed by the ancient crone, who hobbling as fast as age would permit, breathed forth blessings, as well as the state of her lungs would allow her, upon the visitor’s head.

“And may the Lard pour down his sperrit – “

“To drink yer health in,” whispered Jonas to the coachman.

“May the Lard –“

“The greasy mouthed [hypocrite]!” growled John.

At length it was over. The lady got in, the door was shut, Jonas sprang up behind, and John drove rapidly off, while the old crone conscious that her voice could not be heard above the noise of the wheels, raised one [skinny] arm towards the sky, as if to draw down a blessing. Half an [hour’s] swift progress along winding roads, and narrow lanes, and turning sharply aside to the left upon the very brink of a hill, the carriage rolled up a magnificent avenue of beech trees, towards a mansion known as the Enkeman Manor House. Here the lady dismounted and disappeared within, while John drove the vehicle to the carriage-yard. In the hall Mrs Enkeman met her daughter Ellen, a beautiful girl of eighteen – beautiful, though with an almost unearthly beauty, so pale was she, and so brilliant the contrast between her marble forehead, the dark raven masses of hair, and deep sorrowful blue eyes.

“You have been crying,” were Mrs Enkeman’s first words. “Crying about that ungrateful Egerton, I do believe – there go along, bathe your eyes, and come down to tea. I hope the toast is browned properly.”

Ellen turned away perhaps to conceal her countenance, while her mother went upstairs to change her dress, and prepare for tea, to compose her mind for her usual employment, when not engaged in advocating tea and toast as a cure for all evils, which employment was to sit by the fire, knit stockings, and cry “sweet, sweet”, to her canary.

II

The avenue of beech trees leading to the Manor House ran along the edge of a hill, whose slope was thickly wooded until it melted away into meadows, themselves succeeded by a lake, and that at some distance by downs. At a distance from the house sufficiently great to [prevent] the most acute eyesight from recognising more than the

general outline of a form, a green path from the wood below joined the avenue, and here, where a fine view could be obtained, had grown a large yew-tree which human ingenuity had trained into a bower containing a rustic bench. Here, two days after the return of Mrs Enkeman from her visit to Esther, the old crone, there sat a young man, whose eyes, instead of roaming as would have seemed natural over the landscape beneath, were directed through the interstices of the yew-boughs towards the Manor House. Those eyes were blue, the hair above them was brown and luxuriant, the chin firm, the lips full but far from sensual; while the dress though careful was anything but a dandy's. Francis Egerton was a gentleman – no more can be said of his personal appearance. His purpose there may be guessed. He knew that the place was a favourite spot of his beloved Ellen; here she was accustomed to spend whole hours in summer, this was the extremity of her daily walk in winter. Long had he sat there unweariedly waiting, and waiting to see her form, perhaps obtain an interview; at length his eager gaze beheld her advancing. How slowly she walked, all unconscious of the nearness of her lover! Ah, he dared not move, lest she might perceive him, and, though he knew it would be doing violence to her feelings, turn away in obedience to her mother. He saw with grief her excessive paleness, beheld that her head, once well balanced, hung forward, and watched with anxiety the slowness of her footsteps once so joyous, so swift. She came directly towards the evergreen bower, and stood before him at its entrance. He fell at her feet, exclaiming "Ellen! Ellen!" and seized her hand. A light flush came over her features, she trembled, and would have withdrawn, had he not gently detained her.

"Oh, Ellen!" His words poured forth in a liquid, eloquent stream – the sound, the gesture, the all-speaking glance aiding them – how cold when written! "Ellen, forgive me! My love must be my excuse. I am bold, my passion drives me on. Grief, love, consumes me to behold thine altered look, and footsteps slow. Thou art slowly killing thyself, and I, too, shall shortly follow – this through the madness of thy mother. Harsh words, I know, I feel; but true, Ellen, believe me. Wilt thou waste thine own sweet youth in obedience to her prejudice? Do we not love each other? Who shall part us? Come with me, love; I will tend thee till thou art well again. I will strew thy path with flowers – come. What restrains thee?"

"Duty – obedience to her," murmured Ellen.

"Duty!" exclaimed Egerton, clasping his hands together, in a voice of deep despair. She bowed as if moved by a sudden emotion, pressed a kiss upon his forehead, and was gone. For a moment he remained as pale as marble, wildly gazing at he knew not what, then staggered up, fell upon the seat muttering, "Duty – 'tis death!"

Time went by, still there he sat; that one word ringing in his head, that kiss – so pure, yet so passionate, seeming to be still warm upon his brow; hiding his countenance in anguish unalterable. He knew not that evening was descending, noticed not how hard grew the outlines of the frost-bound downs streaked with snow as if chained with frosted silver, heard not the noise of the rooks returning to roost in

the wood, nor saw the showers of rime their motions shook from the trees. He was dead to all but despair. At length when light was fast spreading her raven wings over the earth the sound of voices close by aroused him, and he listened in a state of partial unconsciousness.

"I tell 'ee what it be, John," said some one, in jerky sharp tones. "I shall go – that's what I shall. Missis is mad and no mistake. To think as how we free and independent foot-boys submit to tea and toast is outrageous and terrible. Sal, she be gone, she couldnt stand it, and Jeames is goin" –

"And so shall I, Jonas."

"He! he! Then there'll be nobody left but ould Flisky, the supper anerated charwoman, as can stand tea and toast cause she have the keys and can get at the brandy-bottle. Howsomever – "

The night wind carried away the rest of the conversation, and their footsteps died in the distance. Egerton arose, went to the entrance, and crossing his arms looked down upon the dark wood, then up at the silent stars. A strange expression passed over his countenance. His lip twitched, and the lines of his face grew hard as if with some determination. "I will do it," he muttered, and plunging down the green path was hidden in the darkness of the wood.

III

Mrs Enkeman awoke one morning and would have found herself famous had she known it. Her tea and toast cure had cured her servants of any affection they might have had for her or her money, and all had fled except one old, superannuated female servant. Everybody knew it. The gentlemen said she was a maniac and ought to be confined, ere she did more mischief to her daughter's health. "Only a little whimsical, poor dear thing!" said the ladies, but none went to visit her. Meantime there was the utmost confusion at the Manor House for want of servants to keep the place in order; nobody to send for tea, as Mrs Enkeman moaned, consequently the tea drinking business was likely to come to a dead-lock, had not an enterprising grocer learning the state of affairs driven over from a neighbouring town with a chest or two, which he readily disposed of. Advertisements offering the highest terms were inserted in the newspaper, but in vain; the tea and toast diet of the Manor House was too widely known, and it seemed as though the owner of that mansion despite her wealth would shortly have to perform the meanest household duty herself. "And serve her right!" was the general verdict. At length, however, when matters had come to an unbearable state, a tall, dark-haired man presented himself, offering for an outrageous stipend to act as general servant, coachman, footman, page, groom, or gardener, as circumstances required. He was accepted, and commenced his duties with alacrity, which soon ingratiated him with his mistress, the more especially as he took naturally to tea and toast. Mrs Enkeman was triumphant; she had found some one to her taste, and her faith in her diet was doubled. The footman, page, and gardener all in one, drunk, or

seemed to drink, with increasing gusto the tea provided him; there was no end to the toast he took, and the only point upon which he and his mistress were not perfectly agreed was whether tea and toast, or toast and tea were most efficacious. And thereupon ensued subtle arguments, about as interesting and convincing as argument generally, the upshot being that the man took tea and toast, and his mistress toast and tea; much to the same result as divers disputants have since arrived at. In the same proportion as the footman, page, groom, and gardener grew in favour, did Ellen fall out and become paler, more feeble, less able to subsist on the Enkeman diet, until at length, one morning she was found to have succumbed, found lying unconscious in bed, where she lay without moving or apparently breathing for a whole day, while her mother tried the steam of hot toast and tea as a restorative without effect. Towards evening, becoming alarmed at this continued lethargy, the footman, page, groom, and gardener all in one, was despatched for the family doctor. He came, examined his beautiful patient, and shook his head gravely. The mother turned pale, and seized his arm.

“Madam,” said he solemnly, endeavouring to disengage himself. “You have killed your daughter.”

Mrs Enkeman sank upon her knees beside the bed and hid her countenance. The doctor left her alone with her thoughts. They were terrible. A stunning weight pressed upon her, a stunning sentence rang in her head. “You have killed your daughter!” That daughter’s failing step, her pale features, the circles that surrounded her beautiful, though mournful eyes; all the symptoms of her decaying health rose before the mother’s gaze, frightful as skeletons. She had awakened from her madness, she saw the nightmare that had haunted her, and had at length robbed her of her only child. Her dead husband’s form seemed to stand beside, and point to their unconscious offspring, with a glance of unutterable reproach. So strong the illusion that she arose to fly from the room; rather staggered to her feet, to behold by the light of a dim lamp, the wronged and injured Egerton standing near gazing upon his beloved. This was too much. The mother’s heart gave way, and she fell sobbing, and crying, “Forgive me – I was mad, save her, save her!” The family doctor re-entered, and by the aid of Egerton she was conveyed to her own room, there to pass the night weeping bitterly. Egerton and the doctor returned to the apartment where lay the unconscious form. Both looked at their watches – “It is time – this is the crisis!” burst from both. A small mirror was taken from the wall, and held close to Ellen’s slightly parted lips. When removed it was dimmed. “Thank heaven! She is safe!” exclaimed Egerton. “Oh God, the risk we ran!” His companion smiled, and taking a small phial from his pocket, allowed a few drops of its contents to fall upon Ellen’s lips – Egerton watching him with intense eagerness. “She breathes – she lives – she opens her eyes!” he almost shouted – “She is saved! We have won!”

And she did live. Carefully the news was broken to Mrs Enkeman, and she received it with heartfelt gladness. Slowly, very slowly, the beautiful girl gained strength.

Egerton was no longer banished; when possible he sat by her side; if she was awake he read, if she slept he was silent. Not her mother, recovered as she was from her long affliction, could vie with him in tenderness and attention. The family doctor sent his own servants – there was no fear of toast and tea now – as for the footman, page, groom, and gardener, he had mysteriously disappeared; but that mystery was revealed to Ellen one day, in the early spring, when she and her lover sat together in the yew-
arbour above the wood. Some time had passed in silence – eloquent silence, for when two hearts are in unison there is no need of words – when suddenly Egerton knelt before her as he had done months before in the same place.

“Forgive me dearest Ellen,” he faltered. “Forgive me my [fault] – I deceived thee and her too – it was to save you – my all-absorbing love – forgive me, forgive me?”

“I do, though I know not what for,” murmured Ellen.

“It was I then love - I disguised myself as a menial when all had left you – I – I, with the aid of my friend, your physician, drugged your tea, to produce a lethargy resembling death, that I might save you from death to be mine. My mind shudders at the risk I ran, dearest; wilt thou now forgive me?”

There was a kiss, this time their lips met; and love and devotion had triumphed over tyranny in the form of tea and toast.

Greater Gardens

Richard Jefferies

This title and 'Lawn Preserves' were published in The Globe and Traveller on 19 April and 9 May 1877 respectively and have not since been reprinted. With 'Flowers and Fruit' (reprinted in Landscape and Labour) they form a trilogy of short pieces on how the suburban environment around London could be improved. Jefferies had moved from Swindon to Surbiton early in 1877.

All along the southern outskirts of London from Plumstead Common to Esher, wherever some ancient hamlet has blossomed out into a modern suburb, there is sure to be found an open space of common ground adjacent, half covered with furze and broom. There is a possibility that these places may be preserved from further encroachment, as public opinion recognises the importance, morally as well as physically, of fresh air and sunshine. Some, indeed, are already protected. But few seem to have reflected upon the higher part which these heaths and commons may be made to play in the education – unconscious education – of men and women. Why should such spaces be delivered wholly over to furze? Why should deep pits and dangerous ponds lurk behind thickets to catch the unwary wanderer; why should his foot sink unexpectedly into boggy depths? Cannot these drawbacks be removed, and these heaths and commons formed into greater gardens, or pleasaunces for the people? Lord Bacon, whose taste and authority no one will dispute, was of opinion that a heath was a necessary part of an ideal garden, such as he sketches forth, and which in its entirety was to cover thirty acres. This was to be divided into three equal parts, and the third was a heath or wilderness, and a lovely description he gives of it: “For the heath, which was the third part of our plot, I wish it to be framed, as much as may be, to a natural wildness. Trees I would have none in it, but some thickets, made only of sweetbriar and honeysuckle, and some wild vine amongst; and the ground set with violets, strawberries, and primroses, for these are sweet, and do prosper in the shade; and these to be in the heath here and there, without any order. I like also little heaps in the nature of mole hills (such as are in wild heaths) to be set, some with wild thyme, some with pinks, some with germander, that gives a good flower to the eye; some with periwinkle, some with violets, some with strawberries, some with cowslips, some with daisies, some with red roses, some with *lilium convallium*, some with sweet Williams, red, some with bear’s foot, and the like low flowers, being withal sweet and sightly; part of which heaps to be with standards of little bushes pricked upon their top, and part without; the standards to be roses, juniper, holly, barberries (but here and there, because of the smell of their blossoms), red currants, gooseberries, rosemary, bays,

sweetbriar, and such like; but these standards to be kept with cutting that they grow not out of course."

If Bacon could deem a heath necessary to an ideal garden, surely our commons and waste places about London are not to be despised, but rather looked upon as capable of yielding the purest of pleasures. A little expenditure would achieve so much in this direction. Fifty pounds raised in each locality and judiciously expended would go a long way, for these old-fashioned and wild flowers once planted need no renewal for years. So in ancient orchards there may be seen springing up among the grass crocus and jonquil, and ever the delicately-scented narcissus, which are never tended or watered, but come up year after year. Flowers are extremely tenacious of life if their roots are undisturbed, as they usually are when planted under turf, as would be the case upon a heath. About the sites of monasteries and castles, the walls, aye and the very foundations of which have long since nearly disappeared, there may still be found patches of flowers marking the spot where the gardens were centuries ago. This is so markedly the case in some localities that farmers take care not to turn their cattle out into such fields at certain seasons of the year, lest they should be poisoned by the herbs and flowers originally planted by the monks of old. Their roots have so grown and strengthened that they cannot be eradicated. A local society, therefore, formed for the purpose of planting a heath or common need be under no apprehension that their labour would be thrown away if not continued annually, if they limited their choice to hardy and almost indigenous flowers and shrubs of this kind. This they would naturally do because no one would wish to dig up and steal such common and easily acquired roots. Care must be taken to follow out in its full spirit Bacon's injunction to set such flowers "in the heath, here and there, without any order" – the slightest attempt at regularity of design would be fatal to the leading idea, that of a beautiful wilderness. Perhaps one deviation from his plan might be permitted – the introduction of some trees. Along the northern and eastern sides a plantation of fir would keep away the harsh winds from those points of the compass, and in summer afford a pleasant shade. To boys nothing is so enjoyable as wandering at will among trees, occasionally climbing up and sliding down again, and there are some sorts of fir which are not easily injured by rough usage. Ponds should not be wholly drained, for no pleasance is complete without water, but the deeper places should be filled up to remove all danger. Marshy spots might be planted with reeds. Nothing is more lovely than the tall reed with its feathery head bowing gracefully in the breeze, shooting up sometimes twelve feet high. Here, too, the yellow iris, or brook flag, would grow, and the bulrushes. The wild hop once set speedily spreads, and hangs its festoons from bough to bough, yielding a slight but grateful perfume when the vine-like leaves are crushed in the fingers. It is a beautiful plant; the only difficulty with it is to restrain its too great luxuriance of growth, but that would hardly matter on our heath. Let there be if possible one small ash coppice – put it in an angle or corner -for the boys, so that they may have the pleasure of cutting a stick. To pull out a good big knife bought for a

“bob” and a “tanner”, and whittle away at a tough bough of ash, making it into a hockey-stick, gives joy beyond expression to many a sturdy youngster. It is a joy he dares not revel in now within ten or fifteen miles of London – or, indeed, set his foot inside a hedge. In nooks and shady spots plant our common ferns, the lady fern, the hart’s tongue, the brake fern. This last is already there; then encourage it, with its association of the red deer which once concealed themselves in it all over our “merrie England”. If there are pits and steep hollows, set blackthorn thickly along the edge of the precipice, as a safeguard far more effectual than artificial fencing, which would be out of place. The birch grows freely on most commons; it should be set just above the steep side of such hollows, and the broom and ivy encouraged beneath and up the face of the slope. Neither should the furze and gorse be eradicated – far from it – only so much cut down as will permit of these other shrubs and flowers having a place. There should be no walks or paths made artificially – no gravel or stone of any kind. Simply green paths trodden out just where the wanderer’s fancy leads him. Once planted, let there be a law passed – as unalterable as that of the Medes and Persians – that no saw or pruning-knife wielded by gardener shall come therein. Let visitors pick what flower pleases them; let boys cut sticks and girls make daisy chains and wreaths, and plait the long green rushes as they will, but let no paid hand lay its cruel touch upon the shrub or tree. In this one matter also Lord Bacon, who was speaking of an enclosure, must be deviated from. Rowan and shrub and tree in this wilderness should grow and shoot just whithersoever sunshine and breeze woo them to come. Let there be true liberty for plant and for human being. There would still remain space in plenty for hockey and football and cricket.

There are many true lovers of nature who, once they found such a movement on foot, would gladly do their share, if not in money in kind, which would be even better. They would bring rare heaths and ferns from distant places, and set them to propagate their species in favourable spots. The very cottagers’ dwellings hard by might be asked to give a few wall-flowers, or something of that sort, and the fact of having done so would lead them to take an interest, and to see that no wanton damage was done of malice or aforethought. But in sober justice it must be stated that there are few indeed, even of the lowest class, who will purposely destroy flowers. Should any one scoff at our wilderness let them read “Lothair”, and note how the high-born Corisande, with stately parks and terrace gardens at command, took her chief pleasure in just such an assemblage of old-fashioned flowers, growing free and almost untended. There she delighted in gillyflower and sweetbriar, sweet william, and honeysuckle – thoroughly old English plants. Between Corisande’s garden and Lord Bacon’s heath there is a medium course which would furnish the best model for such a greater garden. So might London be girdled round about with wild flowers.

Lawn Preserves

Richard Jefferies

Thick coverts and broad moors are not always within the reach even of the wealthy – circumstances compelling residence near town – but almost all mansions have their grounds more or less “park-like”, villas their shrubberies and lawns, and semi-detached houses often possess a paddock at the rear. Why should these enclosures be wholly given up to the culture of the “still life” of plants and flowers? Why not, of course within reasonable limits, encourage creatures of a higher organisation, and enjoy the pleasure of watching their curious habits and listening to their song from the drawing-room window? The pheasant, for instance, does not necessarily require half a square mile of wood in which to hide, but if its few wants are satisfied, will live contentedly in a very small area, and come stealing out of the shrubbery on to the lawn as the shadows lengthen, and all is quiet, looking as handsome as if in the glade of an ancient “chace”. If a distant storm rumbles along the horizon, after every flash of lightning the cocks will crow, betraying their whereabouts. What has a more thoroughly homelike appearance than an old country rectory with the peacock proudly spreading his tail upon the garden wall? Artists are well aware of the effect which the introduction of game or bird-life of some kind gives to the picture of a chateau.

Apart, however, from game or “fancy” fowls, there are the songbirds and natural inhabitants of our hedges, whose notes or odd ways will amply repay the very trifling trouble of attaching them to our home preserve. No bird has so deep and liquid a song as the common blackbird, one of Shakespeare’s own birds, as shown by the oft-quoted lines on the ousel-cock with orange-tawny bill; and when all others are silent in the suntide heat of summer it is the peculiarity of the blackbird, like Shakespeare himself, to pour out his “native wood-notes wild”. The thrush, sitting high up on a spray, strains her throat with trills and runs like an educated singer. The bold starling, with burnished coat shining with prismatic colours in the sun, gobbles up the worms upon the lawn, and then mounting the chimney as a rostrum harangues the flock, shivering his wings with all the “action” of Demosthenes, now rising to a shriek of denunciation, now sinking to a low persuasive whistle, till away they all follow him to “pastures new”. There is this advantage about these birds which should particularly recommend them to the home-returning City man, weary of bricks and mortar, railway and bustle, the evening is their merriest time. Their labours, too, are over, and they congregate together and sing. With the declining sun the opera opens in the wood. At the same hour wild animals come forth from their lairs. If you go so far as to permit one or two couples (not more) of timid rabbits to burrow in an obscure sandy corner, they will shyly peep out as the grass grows dewy, and as you sit smoking or quietly gossiping, presently amuse you with fantastic gambols, chasing each other in mazy rounds. The

secret by which the hearts of these little people, feathered or furred, may be won is very simple, and is summed up in the three words, kindness, shelter, and food. They are keen observers, quick to note the slightest token of goodwill. If a pair of birds be permitted to build and breed one season unmolested, they will return again and again, and their offspring after them, so that ten generations may be born in a single tree. The food required is but a few crumbs and seeds in the bitter winter weather – especially during snow, and in the early nesting time – scattered freely and regularly in the same quiet spot, as on the grave of the Minnesinger, when –

Fulfilling his desire,
On his tomb the birds were feasted
By the children of the choir.

The out-of-the-way angle or nook of the grounds (useless for other purposes) which is selected for the preserve should, if possible, be planted with plenty of the common hawthorn, both as tree and bush. It gives a beautiful blossom and perfume in the May, and it is of all trees the favourite with birds and wild creatures generally; the former finding sustenance, too, in the berries. In its thick covert the bullfinch builds – handsomest of all the small birds, with his bright plumage, defiant bearing, and brilliant eye. Blackbird and thrush alike delight in hawthorn, and one species of tit attaches its curious hut-like nest of moss to the stronger branches. This nest is completely covered in, with a hole for a door – quite a little house – and in country places will sometimes be found kept under a glass case as an ornament. If there should be a tree of hawthorn the wild doves may nest there – it is their favourite spot – and on soft, warm days their gentle, loving “coo” will be heard from the lawn. For one bird in the foreign laurels and similar shrubs, ten will frequent the hawthorn bush, and being the hardiest of trees it requires no attention. Ivy is another favourite plant, and in the preserve should be encouraged to grow thickly up and about some old pollard tree. The hedge sparrow and robin will seek shelter there, and the water-wagtail make its nest, in which the cuckoo is fond of laying her usurping egg. The cuckoo has been known to use such a nest close to the bow window of a house, and just opposite in full view. The ivy should trail, too, over the wall in this corner for the same purpose; and if it be an old stone wall, full of crannies where the mortar has dropped out, the yellow tomtit will creep in and lay its eggs as it were in the very heart of the rock. The tit is an amusing creature, hanging under a bough in the oddest manner, while uttering the sharp discordant note supposed to resemble the sound of a file on a saw and to indicate rain. Let there be a small outhouse, if possible, not for use, but simply for the thatch and low eaves, under which the tiny wren will build and roost in the severe weather, and the older and more neglected the thatch the better the birds will love it. Next to hawthorn, the yew is the best of shrubs when formed into a thick hedge as in old-fashioned gardens, the foliage is so close and thick and warm. The nightingale loves hazel and hawthorn, but is so capricious in its choice of locality that it is difficult to attract it. But if once a nightingale builds and is left undisturbed, then you may

reckon upon hearing their song spring after spring. Goldfinches, the sweetest of all the song birds, delight in apple trees, and if only you can contrive to have a few thistles (is not this heresy?) in a place where the gardener will not see and destroy them, you may be sure they will come. The goldfinch revels in thistledown. Swallows like to rest awhile sometimes from their ceaseless flight on the apple branches; but they will not build under the eaves of the modern villa, because the nest is perseveringly knocked down as a nuisance, so little do inmates regard the old-fashioned legend that they bring good fortune. To attract rooks to build in the elms around a mansion is not so easy, for they take the most unaccountable whims and fancies into their wise black heads, congregating freely in trees where one would imagine noise or passers-by would drive them away, and declining to so much as notice the stately avenue of adjacent private grounds. The usual plan is to tie a few bundles of small sticks up in the trees where it is desired to have a rookery, thus deceiving young pairs about to build into the idea that there have previously been nests. Rooks and starlings are great friends; where one is the other will usually be found; so that perhaps to leave the starlings unmolested may aid a little. Starlings are fond of hollows and holes in trees formed by the knots, or decayed branches falling out. Rooks also like a ploughed field, as affording them more easy access to earth grubs. All birds are Orientals in one thing – what they have done once they will continue to do generation after generation, Chinese fashion; the difficulty is to induce them to do it once. The gardener will shake his head at them, though the old notion of the injury they cause is exploded; he will not open his eyes and see that they are his best friends in destroying endless multitudes of grubs and caterpillars. Was it not at Killingworth where they shot all the birds until the land became a desert eaten up with insects? –

Devoured by worms, like Herod, was the town
Because, like Herod, it had ruthlessly
Slaughtered the Innocents.

He will complain of the slugs and the blight, and charge the owner with various chemical compounds purchased to destroy them, but which at the same time shrivel up vegetation; and yet drive away with gun and remorseless shot the very birds who spend their lives in devouring such pests. This corner for the birds should have a path laid down with gravel running through it, so that any one may wander out quietly and watch them closely at their tasks. The immediate neighbourhood of London is peculiarly suitable for such preserves, because it has long been remarked that despite the railways and houses, birds are as numerous, or more so, in its close vicinity as in the distant rural districts. Perhaps the soil is suitable, or the atmosphere warmer; certain it is that summer immigrants, as the swallow, are almost always observed earliest near the metropolis. Birds are noticed to follow certain well marked routes of migration, one of which doubtless passes close to town. So that those who are obliged to reside within a few miles of Hyde Park-corner can nevertheless, at a trifling cost, people their lawns with the denizens of coppice and meadow.

Edward Thomas on the Country of Richard Jefferies

Andrew Rossabi

In April 1907 Edward Thomas was commissioned by Hutchinson to write ‘a life & criticism’ of Richard Jefferies. He received an advance of £100 and, unusually, was allowed a year to deliver the ms. The task was congenial but Thomas approached it without confidence. ‘It is [a] silly thing to do a bad life of a good man and I shall have no leisure to try to do a good one.’¹

In June Thomas interviewed Jefferies’ widow but made little progress. According to Samuel Looker, he alienated her by ‘a rather domineering manner’. Thomas himself believed Mrs Jefferies thought him too young for the job (he was 29) and he had offended her by going for information to people she disliked. ‘She practically refuses me any help, and leaves important questions unanswered.’² He was not allowed to see Jefferies’ note-books.

In August he and Helen took a three-week holiday in Wiltshire. They stayed near Swindon at Broome Farm with Miss Smith, a granddaughter of William Morris, founder-editor of the *Swindon Advertiser* and the town’s first historian. They spent their days walking across the downs and visiting the places connected with Jefferies. In the evenings Thomas, helped by Helen, wrote up his notes.

Much of the material for the first chapter, a detailed survey of Jefferies’ country, must have been gathered during this holiday, the longest Edward and Helen ever took together. Helen recalled it as one of the happiest times in her life.³ Thomas knew the Swindon area well, having relatives in the town with whom he had often stayed during his school holidays. His autobiographical fragment, posthumously published as *The Childhood of Edward Thomas*, testifies to how much Swindon meant to him:

It was for me a blessed place. The stone-work, the flowers in the gardens, the Wiltshire accent, the rain if it was raining, the sun if it was shining, the absence of school and schoolmaster and of most ordinary forms of compulsion – everything was paradisal.

Thomas’s paternal grandfather, Henry Thomas, was a fitter from Tredegar in South Wales who came to Swindon some time after the rolling mills opened in 1861. The Welsh workers were first housed in ‘the Barracks’, a model lodging-house built by the company at the corner of Emlyn Square and Faringdon Road. The three-storey building was originally intended for single males but the strict regime and forbidding Gothic architecture (whence ‘the Barracks’) proved unpopular. Most of the men preferred to lodge in the railway village, where there was less room but also less

restraint.⁴ The opening of the rolling mills induced the Great Western Railway to convert the building into flats, each family having three rooms, with communal washing facilities. This arrangement also proved unsatisfactory. The works manager was often called out to referee disputes, conducted in Welsh, between the women.

Thomas Ellis, the manager of the rolling mills, founded a building society among his men and in 1864 two rows of terraced cottages were erected near the works. Tenants drew lots for the houses, and the street was named Cambria Place, being almost exclusively inhabited by Welsh families. The Welsh formed a large community in New Town. According to the 1871 census 8.25 per cent were of Welsh origin, a higher proportion than in any other English town. The presence of the Welsh gave a stimulus to non-conformity and in 1866 a Welsh Baptist Chapel was built in Cambria Place. For many years the sermons were preached in Welsh.

Henry Thomas died long before Edward's first visit to Swindon which R. George Thomas⁵ says was in 1888, when he was 10. It may have been earlier. In 'How I Began'⁶ Thomas says 'at the age of eight or nine' he was given a notebook in which he pronounced the houses of Swindon to be 'like bull-dogs, small but strongly built'.

The Thomases lived at 19 Cambria Place, now 171 Faringdon Road, a Chinese restaurant.⁷ The house was occupied by Thomas's widowed grandmother, Rachel, and his uncle Harry, who had followed his father into the works as a fitter. An aunt also lived in the town (I have been unable to discover where) and worked in the station refreshment rooms. These were notorious for charging high prices and serving poor coffee, drawn from an urn in the form of a silver-plated model of one of Daniel Gooch's broad-gauge 'Firefly' locomotives, now on display in the railway museum (the erstwhile Barracks).

The Thomas family had strong connections with the railways. Thomas's father held a post with the railway in his native Tredegar and later became staff clerk for light railways and tramways at the Board of Trade. Edward's brother Theodore became technical head of London Transport. Edward's best-known poem 'Adlestrop' describes a train making an unscheduled stop at a small country station. Another poem featuring a train is 'Ambition'. In both poems trains are associated, perhaps paradoxically, with timeless moments of intense stillness and silence.

Jefferies described the GWR works twice as a young journalist – in 1867 for *the North Wilts Herald*, and in 1875 for *Fraser's Magazine*.⁸ He said the Barracks were 'built upon the plan of French lodging-houses, to have a common kitchen and a common entrance, with a day and night porter.' They were 'a vast place, with innumerable rooms and corridors', housing up to 500 men. The rolling mills he called a 'very abode of the Cyclops' and provided a vivid if breathless description of the white-hot iron being rolled into lengths of rail. Jefferies' Hellenism was to the fore at this time, for he likens the rails in cross-section to the Greek letter omega Ω.

For Thomas in 1907, the sojourn in Wiltshire meant work as well as pleasure. He consulted the parish registers at Chiseldon and Swindon, hoping to trace Jefferies' lineage. He told W H Hudson he had found them swarming in the 18th century with 'married men and women named Jefferies, who produced girls and boys yearly, and so far I can't see which of them Jefferies came from.' Luckily the following March an article on Jefferies' forebears by a cousin, Fanny Hall, appeared in *Country Life* and Thomas used the information there.¹⁰ Local people supplied him with reminiscences. But he gleaned little apart from 'a mass of trifles' and decided he would have to use Jefferies' books as his chief source.

On his return from Wiltshire, reviewing kept Thomas busy through the autumn. In November he spent a fortnight at the British Museum and worked feverishly to clear his desk of reviewing before writing the book. He saw Mrs Jefferies again and paid another short visit to Wiltshire, staying at Devizes. He asked his friends to recommend books on mysticism to help him prepare the chapter on *The Story of My Heart*. On 21 December he told Jesse Berridge: 'All my material is ready now, all I am likely to get, and I tremble to be at it in quiet and solitude.'¹¹

A cottage on the Suffolk coast at Minsmere (now a RSPB reserve famous for its avocets) was found by Harry Hooton. At Minsmere, fortified by the North Sea air, Thomas 'got into the thing fast'. In less than three weeks he had written 40,000 words. By mid-February the initial burst of energy was spent and even the heaving moorland and marsh flats, which had at first delighted him, palled. To Bottomley he confided the reason: he had grown very fond of a girl of 17 staying at the coastguard's cottage next door. 'I liked her for her perfect wild youthfulness.' The girl was Hope Webb, one of the daughters of a family for whom Helen had once worked as governess. Her return to school left Thomas 'alone and palely loitering'. His letters went unanswered and on the eve of his departure the girl's parents told him to stop writing.

Despite this disturbance Thomas left Minsmere at the end of February with the first draft completed. He added a chapter of recapitulation and compiled what he called 'a monstrous bibliography for those who come after me'. In the first week of August he sent off the ms to the publishers.

Dedicated to W H Hudson, *Richard Jefferies: His Life and Work*¹² was published on 26 January 1909, price 10/6. Edward Garnett and Henry Salt sent their congratulations. A laudatory notice appeared in the *TLS*, but the *Athenaeum* and *Edinburgh Review* were more critical.¹³ The *Athenaeum* thought Thomas had quoted too much and given details of Jefferies' illness 'only worthy of a medical treatise'. The *Edinburgh Review* praised Thomas's sympathy for his subject but said he had not properly explained Jefferies' insight into the spiritual element in nature.

Although a modest *succès d'estime*, the *Jefferies* did not bring in the work Thomas hoped. Edward Garnett asked him to edit a volume of Jefferies' uncollected essays published by Duckworth as *The Hills and the Vale* in September. But nothing came of plans for a complete Jefferies to be edited by Thomas or of a guide-book to Wiltshire.

Full recognition of Thomas's book did not come until March 1938, when Q D Leavis reviewed selections from Jefferies by S J Looker and Henry Williamson in *Scrutiny*.¹⁴ Mrs Leavis thought the selections had been made by the wrong people or in the wrong spirit and called for a reprint of Thomas's book, which she said 'should be recognised as a classic in critical biography, to stand with Lockhart's Scott and Mrs Gaskell's Bronte in point of intrinsic interest and containing better literary criticism than many critical works.' She contrasted the egotistic, possessive attitude of Henry Williamson with Thomas's self-effacement:

His is a model biography. The author is recognised as being present only by the sympathy that informs the narrative and directs the criticism and determines the selections. The selections from Jefferies' works there are so abundant and well-chosen that Thomas's Life of itself will send the reader to their sources.

Apart from Mrs Leavis' article, most of which was devoted to Jefferies, a few pages in H. Coombes' excellent study of Thomas,¹⁵ and a radio talk by P J Kavanagh¹⁶ welcoming the Faber 1978 reprint (now o.p.) there has been little detailed assessment of Thomas's book.

Why is it so good? Some of the virtues can be stated negatively. Unlike Besant, Thomas does not patronise Jefferies. Unlike Salt, he does not enlist Jefferies in support of a cause. Unlike Looker and Williamson, he does not idolise or identify with Jefferies, although Jefferies had been 'one of the earliest and strongest influences in his life' (Helen Thomas). It is remarkable how Thomas shows such intuitive sympathy without sacrificing detachment. His book contains clear-eyed criticism of Jefferies' faults as well as generous appreciation of his strengths.

Nor (*pace* John Moore¹⁷) does Thomas fall into pastiche, although his feeling for nature was as strong as Jefferies'. His vision, though fostered by Jefferies, whose writings made an indelible impact on him, remains uniquely his own. This comes out in the opening chapter where it would have been easy for Thomas, in delineating Jefferies' country, to lapse into an imitation of his style. He does not. He repays a debt to his mentor and to Wiltshire, which had become his spiritual home, that elusive, semi-mythical 'heart of England' in search of which Thomas spent much of his life travelling, and quietly asserts his own individuality. Nothing could be less like Jefferies than 'little, hard white clouds like rice'. Such imagery marks the incursion of a distinctively modern sensibility into nature writing.

Again unlike Jefferies, Thomas localises his descriptions, and though the face of the landscape has changed, his chapter, structured as a series of walks radiating from Coate, their length determined by the distance 'farther than which a walker from Coate who had to return the same day would not be likely to travel', still makes an excellent guide.

But it is more than a guide, just as the book as a whole is more than a biography. Topography is a feeble word to describe it, for Thomas captures the spirit as well as the

physical lineaments of the North Wilts country. He sees Jefferies (like Crabbe) as pre-eminently a writer of place, a *genius loci*, 'the human expression of this country, emerging from it, not to be detached from it any more than the curves of some statues from their maternal stone'. The 'core and essence' of it are the downs 'which lie south and east and west of Coate': 'The downs in this immediate country of Jefferies are among the highest, most spacious, and most divinely carved in rolling ridge and hollowed flank.'

The downs inspire the finest passages, where the prose makes a solemn but sensuous music like that Thomas found in the lines of the hills, 'the breasted hills curving as if under the influence of a great melody . . . the unbroken undulations are long, and the mind floats with them and sleeps in the melody which they make/ 'Breasted' and 'maternal' are two of Thomas's favourite epithets for what elsewhere he calls 'those sculptured leagues of grassy chalk'. He revels in the sense of space and distance: 'One of the noblest views of the downs and the northern country towards the Cotswolds and Malvern Hills is to be had from the roof of the Elizabethan manor-house at Upper Upham; the legend is that Wales, too, can be seen.' He feasts his eye from the Ridgeway along the height of Hackpen Hill: 'now east, now west, now south, it commands vast soaring and diving grounds for the delighted eyes, among solitary slopes of green and white hills, of turf and cloud.'

The chalkhill flowers at his feet are not forgotten. 'Most pleasant' is the descent to Avebury 'among sarsens that rest on turf blue with sheep's-bit or rosy with rest-harrow'. The book is associated in my mind with blue and white, perhaps because I first read it in Dent's Aldine Library edition (1938) with blue cloth cover and generous white margins to the pages. But blue and white do seem the tutelary gods of this chapter, sky blue, harebell blue, blue, according to Goethe's theory, being the colour of thought, of aspiration, for it is always receding, and the chaste white of chalk or cloud. Together they suggest the sea, mentioned four or five times. At the opening of *Wild Life in a Southern County* Jefferies had described the haunting sound made by the wind as he reclined inside the fosse of Liddington Castle: 'a faint sound as of a sea heard in a dream – a sibilant "sish, sish" – passes along outside, dying away and coming again as a fresh wave of the wind rushes through the bennets and the dry grass.' It is not directly stated in Thomas but is heard in the frequent 's' alliteration: 'the saddening slopes of Barbury Hill', 'Shepherd's Shore' (a hill along the Wansdyke), the tumuli near Lambourn which 'give a solemn tone to so much sweetness and space', the country between Baydon and Aldbourne 'startled and Sundered by the straight Roman road', sometimes in association with dreams, as in the description of Draycot Foliat: 'a fair land is this on a still, rainy, and misty winter day, with its wide, unoccupied fields and dreaming trees – no men, no sound, and the downs as imaginary as the sea-noise in a shell.'

The paragraph beginning 'Jefferies often thought of the sea upon these hills' is too long to quote in full but as a sustained and imaginative evocation of the downs is

rivalled only by the opening of the *Story*. It is a prose poem, charged with heightened feeling yet grounded in the particularity of the observation, the precise language, and subtle variations in pace and rhythm, the long 'u' and 'e' sounds alternating with the short 'i's to create the impression of hills rolling endlessly into the distance. These things are not written about, as they are, however admirably by W H Hudson in *Nature in Downland* and H J Massingham in *English Downland*. They are realised, achieved, through the words themselves:

Jefferies often thought of the sea upon these hills. The eye sometime expects it. There is something oceanic in their magnitude, their ease, their solitude – above all, in their liquid forms, that combine apparent mobility with placidity, and in the vast playground which they provide for the shadows of the clouds. They are never abrupt, but, flowing on and on, make a type of infinity.

The huntsmen on Barbury Hill inspire another good bit of impassioned prose. Not all the chapter is on this exalted level. Thomas displays a wide range of response to what he calls 'a beautiful, a quiet, an unrenowned, and a most visibly ancient land'. History, archaeology, architecture, farming, local lore and legend, are some of the things that engage his interest. He notes the steam ploughs, the telegraph posts, the cider press crawling to Wootton Bassett, the sheep tracks and flint-diggers' cartways. His eye distinguishes 'the charlock-yellow or bean-grey or corn-coloured squares of the arable', 'the dark green elmy country towards Cricklade'. He is good on houses, patrician like The Lawn, the (now vanished) Goddard mansion behind Holy Rood, 'a heavy, rectangular, mellow, but unimaginative house', humble like the cottages in Hodson Bottom which 'have a little window in the middle of the thatch slope, like the dark eye of a hedgehog among his spines'. Towns and villages are thumbnail-sketched but the essence caught. Royal Marlborough is 'with its dormered and gabled High Street, long, wide, and discreet, and, though genial, obviously an entity which the visitor can know little of.' He retails snips of local lore, like the fact that the children at Mildenhall, once a Roman station (Cunetio), used often to pay their school fees in Roman coins, that Coate Reservoir was reputed to have a whirlpool.

Already in 1907 Thomas found this world changed, both from Jefferies' day and that of his own childhood. Coate Farm house 'stripped of its thatch, its ha-ha gone, its orchard neglected ... is the ghost of the fragrant home described so often in *Wild Life*, in *Amaryllis*, and in many essays, by the man whose birth here is recorded on a tablet at the gate.' The Wilts and Berks canal where the young Jefferies had won renown as a skater and Thomas had fished for roach and tench as a boy, 'has now relapsed into barbarism; its stiffened and weedy waters are stirred only by the moorhen, who walks more than she swims across them.' A similar fate had overtaken Holy Rood church, of which only the chancel remained. 'The only sound is the cracking shell of a snail which a thrush hammers on a gravestone.' The quiet note is picked up in the final paragraph:

Such, then, is the surface of this land, such the genial reticence of its fat leazes, its double hedges like copses, its broad cornfields, its oaks and elms and beeches, its unloquacious men, its immense maternal downs. Jefferies came to express part of this silence of uncounted generations.

To the reader coming to Thomas fresh from Jefferies, his style can appear mannered, affected, precious. He had not yet entirely wrung the neck of rhetoric or thrown off Pater's insidious influence. Some strain is evident in phrases like this, on the meadow crane's bill: 'a flower whose purple has wedded passion's opulence and thought's tranquillity.' I am not sure what is meant by the sky taking 'an alms of twilight'. The passage on Savernake Forest is inflated, though there is humour in its noble trees being 'able to sustain without injury the tremendous trifling column to the glory of a Marquess of Ailesbury, of Lord Bute, and of God'. There is the odd inaccuracy: modern scholarship thinks Margaret and Geoffrey in *Greene Ferne Farm* spent the night in Wayland Smith's Cave, not the Devil's Den.

I have no room to discuss the rest of the book, distinguished above all by the excellence of the criticism. But let the part stand for the whole, as Thomas closes the chapter with an apt quote from 'Sport and Science' where Jefferies says:

it has long been one of my fancies that this country is an epitome of the natural world, and if anyone has come really into contact with its productions, and is familiar with them, and what they mean and represent, then he has a knowledge of all that exists on earth.

NOTES

- 1 R. George Thomas, ed., *Letters from Edward Thomas to Gordon Bottomley* (OUP, 1968) p. 140.
- 2 Letter from Edward Thomas to Dr A T Rake, quoted in Samuel J Looker, ed., *Richard Jefferies, Chronicles of the Hedges and Other Essays* (Phoenix House, 1948) p. 13.
- 3 Helen Thomas, *As if Was and World Without End* (Faber, 1972) p. 126.
- 4 *Swindon and the GWR, Introductory Notes*, booklet on sale at the railway museum. See especially pp. 15-16, 'The Barracks': *Notes on the GWR Museum Building*.
- 5 R. George Thomas, *Edward Thomas, A Portrait* (OUP, 1985) p. 3.
- 6 *The Last Sheaf* (Cape, 1928) p. 16.
- 7 KG Watts, 'Edward Thomas in Wiltshire' in *The Hatcher Review* No. 31 (Winchester, 1991) p. 36. I am grateful to Phyllis Treitel for bringing this article to my attention.
- 8 See Chapter III of *Jefferies' Land: A History of Swindon and its Environs*, edited by Grace Toplis (Simpkin, Marshall, 1896) and 'The Story of Swindon' in *The Hills and the Vale*, edited by Edward Thomas (Duckworth, 1909).
- 9 James Guthrie, ed., 'Edward Thomas's Letters to W H Hudson' *London Mercury*, 2 (August 1920) 435.
- 10 'Jefferies Lockett' (pseudonym), 'The Forbears of Richard Jefferies' *Country Life*, XXIII (14 March 1908) 373-6.
- 11 Anthony Berridge, ed., *Letters from Edward Thomas to Jesse Berridge* (The Enitharmon Press, 1983) p. 55.
- 12 *Richard Jefferies: His Life and Work* (Hutchinson, 1909).

- 13 Review by T Seccombe in *Times Literary Supplement* (No. 369) 4 February 1909, 37-8; review (anonymous) in the *Athenaeum* (No. 4248), 27 Mar 1909; review 'Richard Jefferies' by L. March Phillipps in the *Edinburgh Review*, July 1909, vol. 201,221-43. I am grateful to Mr Hugoe Matthews for supplying copies of these reviews.
- 14 Q D Leavis, 'Lives and Works of Richard Jefferies' *Scrutiny*, VI (Mar 1938) 435-46.
- 15 H Coombes, *Edward Thomas, A Critical Study* (Second Edition, Chatto Windus, 1973).
- 16 P J Kavanagh, 'A Labour of Love' talk broadcast on BBC Radio 3/4 on Tuesday, 9 May 1978.
- 17 John Moore, *The Life and Letters of Edward Thomas* (Heinemann, 1939) p. 154.

Letter from Edward Thomas to W H Hudson

A previously unpublished letter probably written soon after the publication of Thomas' biography of Jefferies in 1909; reproduced, with the kind permission of Mrs Myfanwy Thomas who retains the copyright, from a private collection.

Wednesday

My dear Hudson,

Your letter has just been forwarded to me in town and if I were not obliged to go back home this afternoon I should come and thank you for your letter. I am most pleased to have pleased you as I know how you look askance at biographies. I shut myself up with Jefferies submitted myself on all sides to his influence and this is the result. Nearly everyone has said kind things about it. I looked up the passage you did not like. I don't think I would alter it, though perhaps I ought to have admitted the possibility that the conversion was genuine so far as it went – presumably the evidence never convinced me that there was what William James would have called a conversion.

This weather is most beautiful in the country but things are beginning to suffer from the drought and on the Downs they have had no water for some time. Added to this the woodpigeons have been feeding to an unusual extent on the green crops and all over South Hampshire they organized a three days' shoot just before sundown to drive the birds into their neighbours' country.

I shall be up again in a fortnight very likely and hope if you will be in town you will be at the Mt Blanc.

Yours ever

Edward Thomas

PS. Do you know Harry Roberts? I discovered on Sunday that a new house at the foot of Oakshott Hanger just over the hill north from us is his, though he only comes to it for the shortest of weekends. I have not seen him yet.

Mouching Through Jefferies

Brian Rich

From 'Henrique Beaumont' in the *North Wilts Herald* of July 1866 to his last writings in 1887, Richard Jefferies recorded the dialect of Wiltshire in written form, with a high degree of accuracy. Though he never made a formal study of the subject, which was perhaps a pity, his contribution was recognised by G E Dartnell and E H Goddard in their book *A Glossary of Words Used in the County of Wiltshire*, London 1893.

In chapter seven of *The Amateur Poacher*, which was subtitled 'The Moucher's Calendar', we read of Oby and a number of other characters who spend much of their time prowling around woods and hedgebanks of lanes, harvesting what the rest of society ignored, such as nuts, blackberries and flower-roots. Today we still use the word 'mouch', not in quite the same sense, but rather in the sense of walking and hanging about without a purpose. In this short paper the original sense is retained and the purpose is to mouch about some of Jefferies' writings in a search for the vocabulary and dialect used in everyday life in Wiltshire in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

'Cack-handed' or 'ceck-handed'¹ refers to people who are very clumsy and awkward. It is interesting that Jefferies did not seem to know of the expression 'Marlbro'-handed'² which has the same meaning. Marlbro' vawk were traditionally known for their awkwardness and general unhandiness.

In *Greene Ferne Farm*, the church clerk asks Jabez as he enters the churchyard 'How's your voice?' Jabez replies 'Aw, featish. I zucked a thrush's eggs to clear un.' In the same churchyard, Hedges remarks about Margaret Estcourt 'A' be a featish-looking girl.' A simple translation is fairish, but when Jabez describes brandy as 'Eez, this be featish tackle' the intended meaning is much stronger than fair!

The girl in *Round About a Great Estate* who lived in combe-bottom, had a lover who could hardly be described as 'featish'. He was a gurt hummocksing noon-naw, which Jefferies translates as a 'great loose-jointed idiot'. Thee looks like a gurt malkin' is hardly any more encouraging³ and its significance becomes clear when we realise that a malkin was a wet bunch of rags at the end of a stick used for cleaning out the ashes of a bread oven.

Greene Ferne Farm, by its nature, is full of Wiltshire dialect. An old woman is telling some village gossip to Valentine, who is impatient to hear the full story. The old woman says to him 'T'ain't no use caddling I – I can't tell ee no more.' Here, 'caddle' has the sense of annoy or bother, but the word seems to have a wide variety of meanings in the Wiltshire dialect. To caddle a horse meant to drive it over fast; to caddle about meant to loaf about, and to be in a caddle is to be confused and in a real muddle. 'I be all of a jimmy-swiver'⁴ conveys much more than the mundane 'I am all of

a tremble.' 'I be all joppety-joppety' was a Dorset expression of similar meaning.⁵

Words to describe the human condition or actions are common in dialect. The vernacular can often be economical with words. In 'Village Miners', Jefferies even used one dialect word to explain another dialect word. He explains that 'stabble' is used 'of ground, to poach up by continual treading, as near a gateway', where 'poach' is a dialect word meaning to stir up. In the same essay, to 'scout' means to strain with the foot in a supporting position, as would 'horses going uphill, or straining to draw a heavily laden waggon through a mud hole'.

The world of nature also occurs frequently in dialect, with local names for flora and fauna. Again, the evidence is that Jefferies was very familiar with the local North Wiltshire vernacular names for all the aspects of nature around him, particularly with flowers. We shall never know why a local name for meadow cranesbill was loving-andrews⁶ when its more familiar vernacular name was blue basins or blue buttons. In Gerard's Herbal, sun-spurge is recommended for a variety of skin complaints, through the application of its juice or milk, thus explaining its various vernacular names, devil's milk, mad woman's milk, mamma's milk, or wart grass.⁷ However, Jefferies knew it as 'Saturday night's pepper',⁸ a name local to Wiltshire, which cannot be explained.

'Village Miners' is a collection of the vernacular and an essay in folklore ahead of its time. It is full of delights, and certain evidence of Jefferies' potential as a collector of folklore, if he had wanted his scholarship to go in that direction. Other local names in 'Village Miners' for flowers are 'gran'fer gosling' for the early purple orchid, and 'loggerums' for scabious. We also have 'cuckoo's bread and cheese' for the young shoots of the hawthorn, 'snake's victuals' for the cuckoo pint, and 'sod-apple' for the great hairy willow herb.⁹

Round About a Great Estate is a good place to end our mouch. There are some fine old sayings in it as well as some really rich dialect, which was truly local and pure, being spoken by country people who rarely went outside the boundaries of their parish. 'Old hay, old gold' intimates that if a farmer could afford to wait to sell his hay, he was likely to sell for a high price. The death of a horse is the life of a dog' reminds us that, when a horse died, portions of its meat would be sent round to all the adjacent farmsteads for the dogs.

When Cicely asks a boy at the coombe-bottom (chapter 10) whether some of the cottagers will be back for lunch, he replies 'Aw, no um wunt; they wunt be whoam afore night; thaay got thur nuncheon wi' um— Thur beant nobody in these yur housen.' Nuncheon was a word used in Wiltshire and Dorset for a lunch or luncheon. When they went shopping to Overboro' (chapter 4), the cottage women from Okebourne were the despair of the drapers: 'I don't like this shallygally (flimsy) stuff. Haven't 'ee got any gingham tackle?' The draper would then produce a better quality fabric, but it was declared by the women to be 'gallus dear'. This reminds us with gentle humour that the standard of living for most of the villagers in Jefferies' time was very low. Mouching around the village life of Jefferies' time in his writing is a

pleasurable exercise, but nostalgia for the richness of the vernacular language should not blind us to the fact that the old days were not necessarily all that good.

NOTES

- 1 'Village Miners', *The Life of the Fields*.
- 2 Dartnell and Goddard, p. 100.
- 3 *Round About a Great Estate*, chap. 8.
- 4 *Greene Ferne Farm*, chap. 7.
- 5 William Barnes, *A Glossary of the Dorset Dialect with a Grammar*. Dorchester and London, 1886, p. 75.
- 6 'Village Miners'.
- 7 Geoffrey Grigson, *The Englishman's Flora*, London, 1958.
- 8 'Village Miners'.
- 9 *Round About a Great Estate*, chaps. 3 & 2.

Richard Jefferies and the Plesiosaur

Phyllis Treitel

In the *Wilts and Gloucestershire Standard* for 26 July 1873 is an item (page 5) announcing the discovery of coal in the clay beds belonging to the Swindon Brick and Tile Company. It stated that a fossil jaw bone was also found, believed to be that of a plesiosaur. On 2 August the paper stated that Professor Owen of the British Museum had replied to 'us' about the fossil, asking if it could be sent to him.

On 9 August Mr James Shopland sent it, and other fossil bones, to Professor Owen, and on 16 August the WGS made a report, followed by another on 23 August which stated that the bone was now in the British Museum and was part of an unknown dragon.

Richard Jefferies had worked for the WGS in 1873, and earlier, and the suspicion arose that the 'us' to whom Owen had replied might be Jefferies. An approach was made to the Natural History Museum where the Owen papers are held, and the archivist confirmed that several letters from Mr Shopland had been preserved, but only one from Jefferies, and that one not fully dated. The text of the letter makes it quite clear, however, that Jefferies had indeed written to Owen in July 1873 though this earlier letter can not now be found. The later letter, set out below, is considered to be from 1876 when Jefferies spent several months at his aunt's house in Sydenham, striving to achieve the long-desired graduation from Swindon journalist to nationally-known writer.

Shanklin Villa,
Sydenham Park SE
(& Swindon)
April 24th

Dear Sir,

I have heard that you have published a monograph upon a large fossil found in some claypits at Swindon a year or two ago: and that you consider it a new species of sea-dragon. This fossil would have been destroyed by the workmen in the brickyard had I not called the attention of the Company to it, feeling assured of its value:- and indeed I wrote to you at once, and you sent down an experienced assistant to pack it. I should therefore particularly like to see your monograph upon it, if you would kindly inform me where I could get a copy. While visiting here I frequently use the Reading Room at the Brit. Museum and if it were not intruding it would be a pleasure to me as a young student to have a few moments conversation with you. I am making researches for a proposed history of Swindon, Wilts. I find that at Baydon on the chalk hills there was discovered a Roman furnace with [iron] scoriae or slag also *coal*. Now in rambling over these beautiful chalk downs I have often observed what I believe to be huge blocks of ironstone; is it possible that I am right? What I think is ironstone occurs in squarish blocks say 25 to 50 lbs weight, dark colour, and very heavy.

With much respect

I am

Faithfully yours

Richard Jefferies

Professor Owen FRS etc etc
The Brit. Museum

A Collector's List of Jefferies' Titles

1. *Lifetime Works*

- 1873 Reporting; Editing and Authorship
- 1873 A Memoir of the Goddards of North Wilts
- 1873 Jack Brass
- 1874 The Scarlet Shawl
- 1875 Restless Human Hearts
- 1876 Suez-Cide!!
- 1877 World's End
- 1878 The Gamekeeper at Home
- 1879 Wild Life in a Southern County
- 1879 The Amateur Poacher
- 1880 Green Ferne Farm
- 1880 Hodge and His Masters
- 1880 Round About a Great Estate
- 1881 Wood Magic
- 1882 Bevis
- 1883 (Society Novelettes) (has 2 stories by RJ)
- 1883 Nature Near London
- 1883 The Story of My Heart
- 1884 Red Deer
- 1884 The Life of the Fields
- 1884 The Dewy Morn
- 1885 After London
- 1885 The Open Air
- 1887 Amaryllis at the Fair
- 1887 (White's Natural History of Selborne) (has Preface by RJ)

2. *Posthumous works with new material*

- 1889 Field and Hedgerow
- 1892 The Toilers of the Field
- 1896 The Early Fiction of Richard Jefferies
- 1896 Jefferies' Land
- 1896 T.T.T.
- 1902 Nature and Eternity
- 1909 The Hills and the Vale
- 1941 The Nature Diaries and Note-Books ... with an Essay
- 1948 Chronicles of the Hedges
- 1948 The Nature Diaries and Note-Books (has additional material)
- 1948 The Old House at Coate
- 1948 Beauty is Immortal (Worthing Cavalcade)
- 1957 Field and Farm

- 1979 Landscape and Labour
 1981 By the Brook
 1985 The Birth of a Naturalist
 1985 Return to Jefferies' Land
3. *Posthumous anthologies, selected works etc.*
- 1895 Thoughts from the Writings of Richard Jefferies
 1896 The Pageant of Summer
 1896 Hours of Spring and Wild Flowers
 1900 Bits of Oak Bark and Meadow Thoughts
 1901 Saint Guido
 1903 A Little Book of Nature Thoughts
 1905 The Pocket Richard Jefferies
 1909 Selections from Richard Jefferies
 1910 A Calendar of Nature
 1933 The Makers of Summer
 1935 Out-of-Doors with Richard Jefferies
 1937 Richard Jefferies: Selections of His Works
 1937 Jefferies' England
 1940 Readings from Richard Jefferies
 N.D. The Sun and the Earth
 1944 Jefferies' Countryside
 1944 Richard Jefferies' London
 1945 A Richard Jefferies Anthology
 1946 The Spring of the Year
 1947 Summer in the Woods
 1948 The Jefferies Companion
 1948 The Essential Richard Jefferies
 1950 Meadow Thoughts
 1951 Wild Flowers
 1955 The July Grass
 1979 The Pageant of Summer, and Other Essays
 N.D. Rural England
 1982 Under the Acorns
 1982 The Water Colley
 1983 Landscape with Figures
 1987 Some Spirit Land
 1987 The Eye of the Beholder
 1988 A Rook Book
 1990 Sea, Sky, and Down
 1990 The Wessex Landscape of Richard Jefferies
 1991 Country Vignettes