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The Gamekeeper's Larder is not reproduced in the online version as it was discovered by Rebecca Welshman that the article was written by John Watson – not RJ.

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The Coming Voter

(By a farmer's son)

These two articles by Jefferies were undetected until 1993. In that year, a letter from Jefferies to CP Scott, referring to them, was discovered, and they are reprinted here for the first time.

The Manchester Guardian 11 April 1884

I

Now that the bill for the enfranchisement of the county householders has been read a second time it may be interesting to take account of the voter of the future, and to consider what, if any, are the political or social traditions of the agricultural labourer, what his ideas, and what the influences to which he is most likely to be subjected when he receives the right to vote. Of political traditions it may at once be safely asserted that the labourer retains none whatever. The question in which his immediate forefathers were most deeply concerned was the cheapening of bread. They felt more perhaps than any other class the privations which accompany a dear and scarce loaf. They bore comparatively a small share in the severe party warfare which preceded the abolition of the Corn Laws, but they watched the contest with the keenest appreciation. Hunger is a terrible sharpener of the faculties, and they knew what hunger was. Traditionary stories are still common at the farmstead firesides of the guarded cornricks, of ricks eaten by mice while the cottagers starved, and the numberless miseries of those times. These are not forgotten in the upper country classes, but the labourers seem to have entirely lost sight of the past. Had they been endowed with political rights at the time of the abolition of the Corn Laws doubtless they would have remembered everything perfectly; but having had no voice before or since they have had nothing to keep their memories alive. As things were ordered for them so they submitted, and all they knew of politics or rights (or wrongs) was that now and then they got some ale on condition of shouting. Except here and there an old man, they have forgotten even the threshing machine riots, in which they were for a time partly triumphant - smashing and burning at pleasure. Even these Jack Cade exploits have passed out of thought. In the cottage there is no history; no ballads transmit the recollections of events; no manuscript chronicle or journal of their own keeping is to be found in the thatched house of the labourer. It is curious that it should be so, since among so many other nations political events are fresh after centuries, and are talked of at the hearths of the poorest. The Scotch have not forgotten their clans, their raids, and border history; nor have the Welsh their ancient extraction. But the Saxon labourer is not of a literary stock, and lives in to-day and to-day's labour only. He does not seem to look backwards any more than the plough he follows, and which the instant the team is unharnessed remains perfectly still and motionless. This has been unjustly taken as evidence that the ploughman has little intelligence. But how should he remember history when he has not been permitted to bear the least hand in

making that history? Much in the same way, the great majority of women, though so highly educated in these times, have little or no recent historical knowledge, for, having no vote or personal interest, they have not paid heed. If the ploughman had been endowed with political rights when the Corn Laws were abolished and his hunger was stayed, without a doubt his memory would have been fresh enough. He has forgotten his forefathers' hunger. In those days the hedges were carefully searched for herbs to eke out the scanty meal on the cottage table. Salads were gathered from the mounds, and plants were used that are now disregarded. Hunger made the old folk herbalists. The old hedge-herbs used as sauce or salad flourish as freely as ever, but no one now touches them. Vast importations of American wheat shut up the herbals. Cheap bread in such abundance and for so many years without check has clean swept away the memory of hunger. The carter and the ploughman scarcely listen to the prayer against famine, a word they do not understand. It is remarkable that just at this juncture the grain market should be more than usually well stocked - so well supplied from India, Egypt, and Australia that American grain speculators find their expectations disappointed. Amidst a most plentiful supply of corn it is proposed to extend the franchise to the labourer, who has forgotten the hunger of his forefathers. The first and most essential step in his political education will be to revive those memories, and to put into the hands of every labourer throughout the country a brief relation of the immediate past to take the place of historical tradition. If this be not done we may yet see some strange results of their political ignorance, and efforts at least will not be wanting to induce the new voter to agitate for the very things - for sliding scales and import duties - by which his fathers were brought to the verge of starvation. Here is manifest the danger of keeping a large part of a nation politically ignorant. It is just possible that the labourer might be entangled by some sophistry into a cry for a modified import duty in order that his wages might be increased. Such a wish certainly exists in the secret heart of a good many agriculturists, nor is it confined to them. City merchants of considerable standing may sometimes be heard expressing a desire for some kind of Protection. Free Trade was established in spite of self-interest. Self-interest still very largely hankers for Protection under some disguise or other, and Free Trade must always depend upon the efforts of the broad-minded and the enlightened. If the city merchant and the agriculturist are sometimes known to utter these views it will not be surprising if the labourer joins them. His last political and social movement of any importance was the agitation for higher wages. His trade union meetings on hilltops were for that purpose. So great a temptation is a possible increase of wages that in prospect of it he might be led to barter away his birthright of cheap bread. For, whatever may be the case with other portions of the community, there can be no question that cheap free food is of infinitely greater real value to the labourer than a slight increase of nominal earnings. To supply this defect of political memory and training should be the first effort of those who are anxious that the labourer should reap the full benefit of his new rights. He cannot or will not purchase publications of the kind. They must be given to him, sown broadcast in every cottage at the expense of the well-to-do and better informed. There is one

advantage in this absence of historic memory: his mind is without bias, and open to fairly consider anything reasonable set before it. He can now read, he is fond of reading, and is in a receptive frame of mind.

There is, indeed, a very exceptional conjuncture of circumstances in the position of those who are about to receive the franchise. Rights of this kind are usually granted after much struggling, and in other less fortunate countries than ours not till after attempts at revolution. Very great excitement has preceded the passing of Reform Acts extending the voting power in boroughs. An entire absence of such agitation on the part of those chiefly concerned marks the all-important step now about to be taken from all similar changes. No agitation has occurred in the rural districts. However much the suffrage be desired, no vehement outcry has been heard. This calm preceding the franchise is significant of a similar calm to follow it. It is perhaps the very best and strongest argument in favour of the suffrage that there is no evidence whatever of violent passions at work, so that we may be sure the new voters will use their power judiciously. They will not be hurried to extremes, but will listen to and ponder what is said to them. A still more exceptional circumstance lies in the fact that now, for the first time in its existence, the class about to be enfranchised is fairly well educated. Able to read, the labourers can follow and understand all that takes place. Yet they have no personal experience; they are in the position of students full of book learning, but unacquainted with the real world. Here is, then, a full-grown man, educated, without history, about to have power put into his hands. The mind of the agricultural labourer is to-day like a clean sheet of paper on which nothing has yet been written, but upon which the writing will probably be durable.

The Manchester Guardian 15 April 1884

II

The inhabitants of a rural hamlet are quite in the hands of the landed proprietor. The majority must live in the landlord's cottages, the few that do not are still more or less dependent upon the tenant farmers for employment, and do not care to put themselves outside the pale of those little amenities that are sometimes forthcoming. Either from dread that the few good things of life should become fewer, or in hope of more small doles, those who could perhaps stand aloof are usually as easily managed as the rest. No matter what they may think these people who have no second string to their bow, but must live by agriculture, can only yield in silence and do as they are told. For the most part, not having any high aspirations, they find no difficulty in obedience, caring not at all so long as they get sufficient food. We have often been congratulated on the disappearance of feudalism, and outwardly indeed it is gone. Retainers no longer ruffle down the village street in doublet and hose, with lance or dagger; there is no barricade at the

entrance to the village and demand of toll upon goods; the wheat can be taken to the mill without payment of a portion to the lord; cadets of the noble house no more lie in wait at evening in the forest or on the common to fill their empty purses by robbery. The whistle of the train is heard among the cottages though the station is at a distance, and with the first train it was said feudalism was carried away. Closer examination and the ability to read between the lines will demonstrate that the ancient feudal power exists to this day. It is felt down to the smallest detail of cottage life. A girl wishes to improve her position in service, to get a really good place in town; she must then obtain a character from the parish clergyman. This person is really the landlord's chaplain, just as was his predecessor who rode hawking with his lord in the days of King James, and far longer ago than that. The landowner's chaplain is a very great power indeed among the village girls, having so much influence in this way. It is necessary to attend his classes, confirmations, and so forth, in order that his good word may be forthcoming. There is no one else in the village who can give so valuable a character. A farmer is nobody. A substantial man at home, and a man whose word is as good as his bond, at a distance people in good society consider him a better sort of clodhopper. Middle-class people are glad to get servants from farmhouses, but a little higher in society they require, or at least they are much influenced by, a clerical recommendation. In the olden times the lord of the castle did not march about the manor sword in hand, threatening everyone with violence who did not do as he wished. His will, or his policy, was carried out in its minute details by his retinue, and the case is the same today. It is not to be supposed because the armed retainers have vanished that the policy of the mansion does not penetrate into those peaceful thatched cottages. The policy does penetrate, and most forcibly affects every poor person in the place. The general idea of that policy is that all advantage, success or profit, achieved by man or woman, should emanate from the mansion, or should be only possible under the patronage of the mansion. No monetary gain, of course, accrues to the mansion from this control. The gain is simply one of power. Men and women like power, and sometimes and to some natures the more petty the power the higher it is valued. It is not only the actual owner of the estate who likes such power - perhaps personally he cares not an atom about it, being engaged in more manly pursuits - but there is the lady, the lady's friends, the parish clergyman, the steward, one or two residents in the immediate neighbourhood closely connected by marriage, and all these together form quite a little party. The party has ways of learning every trifling incident that occurs in the village, and can find agents to carry out its wishes in roundabout directions when immediate pressure is not possible. This power is not often vindictive; it is often exercised for genuine good; but it is still a system of complete interference. 'We who sit round our drawing-room table at the mansion must have the mastership; nothing must be done without us; if anyone initiates a

reading room or a cottage flower show, or any movement, we instantly step in, and by virtue of our large subscription and by the strength of our prestige take the leadership. We do not expect profit from our efforts, but we insist upon the power, however petty.'

Thus is the feudal policy of the nineteenth century rampant at this hour in the remote hamlets. It penetrates into the least detail of cottage life, as, for instance, in the matter of this recommendation of the landowner's parish chaplain, who stands alone in the village, a species of official, an authority, a central individual to whom application must be made. The position and power of the rural clergy is singular and anomalous. Probably there are no men living, not even the priest in Roman Catholic countries, who wield such undisputed autocratic power in these domestic and social matters as the parish clergy in England, one of whom may be found in every village over that vast area to which the extension of the suffrage will apply. As all the land and three-fourths of the cottages belong to the mansion, there has been no escape from these influences. A man must live in a landlord's cottage or leave the village; if he lives in the landlord's cottage he must bow to the will of those who represent the owner. Not the least little step can be taken without the permission of the lord of the place. If a cottager wishes a piece of allotment ground he must go to the steward, or the steward's agent; in some districts he must go to the clergyman. If a member of his family be a cripple or require hospital treatment he must go to the clergyman, or approach the mansion through some large tenant farmer who can speak for him, and obtain the patronage of the local great. Now the knowledge that these things are only procurable by favour is eminently calculated to keep the whole village in a condition of subjection. Poor people are careful how they offend the mansion or the mansion-party, because to do so is like cutting themselves off from civilisation. Hospitals, medical or surgical treatment, institutions of all kinds so familiar to residents in London and the great towns, and comparatively so easy of access, are a long, long way from the poor in remote villages. They hardly know the name or situation of these institutions. They have not the least idea of the means of gaining admittance; they have no money to carry them so far. The poor in cities have many friends. Rich people abound and are often very charitable. A poor sufferer has only to get his or her case known, and someone or other will probably step in and assist. Nothing of the sort exists in country places; it cannot be so because there is no class of wealthy residents. Means of communication, too, are still expensive, and the long journey to London or some other great city practically prohibitive. One central authority alone stands, abrupt, solitary, distinct - the mansion - accessible only in certain well-understood if unwritten ways. The tenant farmer can give a card, as it were, of admission; the steward is all powerful; even the lodge keeper can do it; the parish clergyman is the principal representative. But it must be through these. If the poor man be of an independent spirit, and will not humble

himself to apply to these, then he is simply cut off from civilisation. If the poor man and the poor man's family do not display a subservient and willing spirit they cannot expect notice to be taken of them. They are not supposed to render any manual service; it is the yielding spirit that is demanded, the acknowledgement of precedence and power. In mediaeval times some of the small cottage occupiers had to do so many days' labour on

the domain land of the lord; some had to bring so much payment in kind or produce. The cottager has not to pay a fine of poultry or fruit nowadays for the privilege of the lord's favour and protection; he has only to display the obedient disposition, to show an inclination to ask for and value little favours. Even the schoolmaster in many villages is the nominee of the mansion party, and there is no end to the ramifications of this kind of interference. Relief in time of sickness or confinement has to be obtained from the Board of Guardians. The guardian of the parish is invariably a tenant farmer, a great right-hand man of the parish clergyman, and often proud indeed to be called in to deliberate with the mansion party. When the applicant appears before the board the custom is to ask the opinion of the guardian of his parish, 'What is the man's character?' Well, character is an expansive word, and may be interpreted to cover conduct, independent or otherwise. If the medical man orders relief it cannot be reduced or refused. If not, it depends very greatly upon the word of the guardian of the applicant's parish. Poor people, knowing that sooner or later they may have to ask for assistance, do not like to act contrary to the known wishes of the higher powers in their own parish. Rarely does any vindictive action follow opposition, but they constantly meet with the cold shoulder. Their petitions are not heard; they are passed by.

The lot of the poor is so hard even in its best aspect that they cannot afford to lose the countenance of those thus placed above them. That they hate and detest their own subservience is an undoubted fact. They are never grateful in reality, not for the greatest benefit; they always feel that they have paid for it in tacit obedience. But they have not been able hitherto to escape. Go into the fields and accost a labourer at his work, and ask him what his wages are. A young man may answer at once, being full of the carelessness of youth that has felt no cares. An older man will look you in the face, and hesitate, and scrape his boots against his spade, and ask a question of you first in return. He suspects you may be some kind of agent from some society not popular with his master, the farmer, and the mansion party; you may be a conspirator against the peace of the village, perhaps trying to start a strike to raise wages. That is to say, you may get him into trouble. It may become known that he has given you information; you may quote him as an authority; it may embroil him with his employer; he may lose the countenance and favour of his superiors. He would much rather you would walk on than try to raise his wages with your interference. If he listens to you he will be passed by

and his little petition some day disregarded. He has had experience, and remembers a good many things. By explaining your object, and making him see that it is no more than passing curiosity, you may hear all about it, for he is really very talkative, but cautious at first.

There is feudal policy in the very air that blows over the park. Upon a large property there is a great deal of work to be done - gates to be made or mended, fencing to be put up, sheds to be repaired, walls to be rebuilt, and so on. Employment of this sort is much desired, the payment being secure, and the labour perhaps not always onerous. On some well-wooded estates there is a workyard, with sawpits, where a number of men are employed all the year round preparing timber. In the covers and plantations there is work for many more. Altogether the maintenance of the place in order requires the labour of enough people to fill a hamlet by themselves. They receive substantial benefit from such employment, and they have no reason to be otherwise than pleasantly subservient. They really have nothing to complain of, but still the fact remains that they are expected to be tacitly obedient to the policy of the mansion party. They are not expected to do anything, but are to show by their manner a plastic disposition. The village post-office is practically in the patronage of the governing circle, and the licences of the inns are sometimes at the disposal of the magistrates, when of course the views of the landowners are consulted. The little village shops have to apply to the magistrates for licences to keep petroleum, much used now in cottages. Before these are granted the premises have to be inspected by the police. As for the village constable, a labourer's character is often at his mercy; if the constable be upright it is well; if he be not upright it is very ill indeed. Now the constable's chances of promotion depend very much upon whether he has made himself acceptable to the governing circle or not. The labouring people therefore do not like to put themselves in any position savouring of opposition lest their faults and slips from the path of virtue should one day be remembered by the constable and produced as a black mark against them. There is no actual organisation in this system of control, which permeates the village from end to end. It is all effected by mutual understanding, but an understanding of a distinct and unmistakable character. The influence is so pervading that it seems in the very air. This is the air which the future rural voter breathes; these are the influences which today dominate his whole life.

Richard Jefferies' 'The Coming Voter'

Diana Morrow

Richard Jefferies' 'The Coming Voter' was published in *The Manchester Guardian* in 1884, but has not appeared in many subsequent anthologies of Jefferies' work. The neglect of this article is in some respects understandable. It is a heavy-handed piece of political journalism, which lacks the impassioned lyricism of Jefferies' transcendentalist work, and has none of the more down-to-earth appeal of the 'country books'. It merits investigation however, both by historians interested in examining the contemporary responses to the Third Reform Act, and by scholars endeavouring to understand Jefferies' intellectual and political development. The following analysis of 'The Coming Voter' begins by surveying Jefferies' other writings about the extended franchise, and locating his stance on this issue within the context of political discourse in the early 1880s. It then outlines the aims and arguments of 'The Coming Voter' and compares them with Jefferies' other pronouncements on the enfranchisement of the rural labourer. Part of the interest of the article is that while it upholds the same goals and aspirations as many of Jefferies' other pieces, it does so by presenting a very different portrait of the contemporary rural scene. This portrait was intentionally designed to horrify and hopefully to galvanise the primarily urban and Liberal readers of *The Manchester Guardian*.

The impact of the extended franchise in the countryside is a prominent and recurrent feature in much of Jefferies' work. Indeed, arguably the key factor in Jefferies' political radicalisation was his dramatic expectations regarding the impact of expanding the rural electorate. Beginning in 1877 with *The Future of Country Society* (*New Quarterly*, July 1877), Jefferies expressed the view that getting the vote would have enormous repercussions for the agricultural labouring class. It would in fact signal a major power shift in the countryside.¹

Jefferies does not lament this, rather he lauds schemes for county reorganisation based on broader principles of representation. In contrast to earlier works where he defends benign landlordly paternalism, he now stresses the social separation between landlords, labourers and farmers, a separation which he likens to a great moral and social revolution having passed over the land. The Reform Act, the ballot box, and the transfer of power to the populated manufacturing districts are highlighted as the chief causes of the decline of family influence and party jealousies.² The general tenor of *The Future of Country Society* is progressive and forward-looking, welcoming increased education, independence and representative government.

In *Hodge and His Masters* (1880) there is the same perception that the rural sector is experiencing a fundamental transformation and that long-established social certainties are breaking down irreparably. However, *Hodge*, written for the

conservative newspaper *The Standard*, is more sympathetic to landlord and farmer than to the agricultural labourers. The latter's loss of respectful deference towards social superiors is repeatedly lamented, as is the shift in power which has elevated the labourer to a 'linch-pin' position. Unlike the 1882 Royal Commission on the Depressed Condition of Agricultural Interests, which placed great onus on bad weather, *Hodge and His Masters* presents a bleaker diagnosis of the rural malaise. Contemporaries might conclude from its pages that agrarian social bonding was little more than a wishful daydream based on times past. Much of this sense of irreversible social change in the countryside hinged on Jefferies' perception of the labourers' altered role, and his belief that when they obtained the franchise, they would no longer willingly conform to a hierarchical social order based on deference and patronage.

Interestingly, *Hodge and His Masters* marks Jefferies' final use of a patronising and critical tone towards the labourers. Whether this tone was genuine, or merely 'sold' to the appropriate source is open to question. Jefferies' sympathy for the labourers' plight did not, as some critics have suggested, emerge in the 1880s alongside his more radical stance, but was evident in much of his early journalism. Certainly the following journal entry, written in the same year as *Hodge and His Masters* contains none of that book's sentiments regarding the labourers' gullibility and lack of gratitude: 'I wrote to express my hope that the new Government will at once enfranchise Hodge. Give Hodge his due. Hodge has been a machine and work slave. In truth Hodge has been the mainstay of England these 1000 years, battle and breeze, but has had no voice.'

Concern about the often appalling conditions endured by the 'work slaves' and a sympathetic appreciation of the tyranny of labour assumed a more prominent place in Jefferies' writings from the early 1880s onwards. This was buttressed by a new emphasis on labourer independence. In articles such as 'Country Literature' (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 1881) and 'The Wiltshire Labourer' (*Longman's Magazine*, 1883), Jefferies contends that the primary aim of rural reform should be to encourage a race of informed and independent countrymen 'without one particle of servility'.⁴ The importance of the franchise in effecting that aim is most explicitly and dramatically delineated in 'After the County Franchise' (*Longman's Magazine*, 1884). In this piece, Jefferies predicts that, once cognisant of the full meaning and force of their voting rights, the rural labourers will want to set up a legitimate and effective form of self-government in every village. Moreover, the labouring men spearheading this movement will be conscious of the divergence of interest between themselves and the propertied classes.

In the village council which Jefferies proposes for the post-enfranchised rural sector, property is not excluded altogether, but votes are equal. Local government of this kind would enable villagers to live a distinct and separate existence from farmer and landlord. While making it clear that '[t]he landowner has nothing

whatever to fear for his park, his mansion, his privacy, his shooting or anything else',⁵ it is obvious from Jefferies' further suggestions for compulsory opening up of parks and woods to the public, that landlords in the conjectured post-franchise regeneration have suffered a demotion, sidelined into a curatorial role. Despite the tolerant acceptance of their right to co-exist with other players on the rural stage, Jefferies attacks their control of non-elected magistracies, and suggests that the labourer must view his own interests as distinct from those of property.⁶

This sentiment is also prevalent in *The Dewy Morn* (1884), a novel which gives vent to a passionate and impetuous radicalism. It virulently attacks landlords, unequivocally supporting the extended franchise and defending the 1872 Ballot Act. Jefferies was understandably concerned, when sending the manuscript of the novel to Longman's in December, 1883, that it not be given to a Tory reader, 'or it will be condemned without mercy'.⁷ Once again, in this work, Jefferies presents the extended franchise as a seminal and decisive development. The astute and machiavellian Letitia Cornleigh, for example, alone realises that the Ballot Act, once the labourers acquire the vote, will 'put the axe to the root of the tree of Cornleigh'⁸ [ie to the landed elite].

Thus in a range of journalistic pieces and in his fiction, Jefferies repeatedly conveyed his sense of the seismic repercussions of the extended franchise. Faced with the social and economic transformations wrought by the agricultural depression and by the expansion of technological and educational horizons, the rural sector is presented as moving away from deference/dependency relationships towards a new independent and self-governing pattern of existence. Within this context, the extended franchise is presented as the final nail in the coffin-lid of the old rural order.

Jefferies was by no means unique in ascribing a seminal role to the enfranchisement of the rural labouring class, or in envisioning a rejuvenated democratic, and vital village life flourishing in the aftermath of the Third Reform Act. The urban crisis, agrarian depression, Henry George's influential writings, and Joseph Chamberlain's 'three acres and a cow' campaign, combined to place land reform and rural regeneration into the forefront of national politics in the early 1880s.⁹ Although Jefferies had some reservations about smallholdings as a panacea, the views and solutions espoused in his work in the 1882-4 period mirror advanced Liberal responses to the crisis in the rural sector, in their anti-landlordism and anti-clericalism, their focus on the sorry conditions still endured by the labouring population, and their emphasis on education and local government as a means of fostering villager independence and dignity. An article such as 'After the County Franchise' was, in sentiment and prescription, so obviously in the Liberal camp regarding rural reform that Charles Longman, in publishing it, felt obliged to explain that, as editor, he was not really 'overstepping the limit which he laid down in undertaking to keep *Longman's Magazine* free

from the strife of party politics ..¹⁰ Edward Thomas, true to the cult of Jefferies the nature priest, construed this editorial interjection as consistent with Jefferies' supra-political stance: 'He was by that time above and before either party. He is so still.'¹¹ In fact, Longman's somewhat uneasy disclaimer probably sprang from his appreciation of the essay's obvious political allegiance.

The tendency to regard enfranchisement as a touchstone was a particularly Liberal one. Liberal enthusiasm about the perceived positive repercussions of the extended franchise in the countryside caused *The Spectator* in 1883 to predict widespread disillusionment once electoral reform failed to instantly usher in 'payment of parliamentary members, abolition of the House of Lords, reduction of the civil list, disendowment of the Church, the imposition of a land-tax, a progressive death duty and Home Rule for Ireland.'¹² However, contrary to *The Spectator's* view of uniform and starry-eyed Liberal support for electoral expansion, there were a number of Whigs in the party who had legitimate fears and doubts about the prospect. Not surprisingly, such doubts also featured among Conservatives, many of whom held dramatic, gloomy expectations about the proposed extended county franchise. Lord John Manners for example believed that granting the vote to the agricultural labourers would simply hand over 'political power from those who at present exercise it in the Counties of Great Britain to those who do not exercise it', and wondered how 'the classes now represented are to be safeguarded so that they shall not be deprived of every shred and vestige of political power.'¹³ Sir Robert Peel claimed that the changes amounted to 'a direct holding out of a bribe to the most ignorant classes of this country.'¹⁴

Such sentiments among Conservatives ensured that the Bill encountered strong resistance in the Lords. But during the summer Joseph Chamberlain and John Morley led the radicals against the peers, who, in Morley's famous phrase, would have to be 'mended or ended' if they rejected the Bill -¹⁵ Perhaps this warning had its effect, for the Bill was passed by the Lords later in the year. By admitting a good proportion of the agricultural labourers to the vote, with the protection of the ballot¹⁶, the Liberals had struck an effective blow at the deferential structure of county politics.

The blow was by no means fatal, however, despite the 1885 Liberal landslide. In the long term, the Liberals, distracted by other issues, failed to maintain the momentum in the countryside, and the 'agricultural interest' was to prove more resilient and durable than many would have predicted. In this respect, 'The Coming Voter', written in 1884 when the Third Reform Bill was in its second reading in the House of Commons, was both prescient and prophetic. For it exhorts the Liberals to keep up the process of education and propaganda to the rural labourer, and warns them of the probable results of failing to do so. In presenting his dramatic case for the need for the right kind of ongoing political

education in the countryside, Jefferies drew a picture of a rural sector still stifled by feudalism. This version of the contemporary countryside, so different from that conveyed in his other contemporaneous works, was guaranteed to raise the hackles of the *Manchester Guardian's* readers.

Indeed, the entire piece was skilfully tailored to suit that paper's politics; to reinforce its Liberal shibboleths and to warn against its traditional entrenched and influential foes. Since its inception in 1821, the *Manchester Guardian* had been a moderate organ of English Liberalism; pro-free-trade but immune to more radical stances. With the appointment of C P Scott as editor in 1872, this tradition seemed likely to continue, as Scott was an adherent of a cautious and circumspect Liberalism. From 1879, however, with the appointment of W T Arnold¹⁷ to the editorial staff, the paper began gradually to adopt a more radical stance. The catalyst for this drift toward radicalism was the Irish question, and as the paper became more outspoken on the Home Rule issue, the tenor of its politics generally grew more critical and outspoken. By the late 1880s the paper was indisputably an organ of advanced radicalism.¹⁸ When 'The Coming Voter' appeared in 1884, this drift was under way.

The paper had also, with the advent of Arnold, developed a strong reputation for 'country' pieces. In one year alone, 1882, it provided its readers with long series of articles on 'Rare Birds of Lancashire', the 'Past Fauna of Lancashire and Cheshire', and 'Our Northern Birds of Prey'.¹⁹ Jefferies was a valued contributor from the south, with descriptive country pieces such as 'The Water Colley'.²⁰

'The Coming Voter' was, however, exclusively concerned with politics, its proclaimed purpose being 'to take account of the voter of the future, and to consider what, if any, are the political and social traditions of the agricultural labourer; what his ideas, and what the influences to which he is most likely to be subjected when he receives the right to vote.'²¹ In addressing these issues Jefferies skilfully intertwines three of the strongest ties holding together the disparate strands of late nineteenth-century Liberalism: the gospel of free trade, anti-aristocratic and anti-clerical sentiment, and support for parliamentary reform.

The need for the latter is immediately apparent, for when Jefferies sets out to examine the political and social traditions of the agricultural labourers, he finds that they do not have any. Because labourers possessed no political rights in the past, that past does not seem to involve them. Political participation and active involvement are presented as pre-requisites for the collective memory which reinforces self-identity. Lacking these, the English agricultural labourers are heedless, curiously blank and disengaged. This is unfortunate, as they should be reminded about the legacy of the past, particularly the hunger and hardship endured by their forebears as a result of the Corn Laws, legislation designed to cushion the established and richly endowed traditional rural elites while the rural poor starved.

Once the labourers become voters, Jefferies adjures that it will be imperative to ensure they receive the right kind of political education. Failure to do so could see them fall prey to outside agitators clamouring for protection. With a dexterous sleight of hand, Jefferies manages to link the bugbear of Protection and Self-Interest (as opposed to the altruism and international harmony associated with the gospel of Free Trade) with trade-unionism and labour disaffection. The reader is reminded that the agricultural labourers' last political and social movement of any importance was the agitation for higher wages.²² Trade-unionism and the prospect of higher wages might cause the labourer to "barter away his birthright of cheap bread".²³ To prevent this, Jefferies urges that publications expressing appropriate doctrines be distributed in the villages. The fact that the suffrage extension is being effected without any passionate conflagrations or violence bodes well for the labourers' rational and judicious use of their new powers. The rural labourer's mind is 'like a clean sheet of paper on which nothing has yet been written, but upon which the writing will probably be durable.'²⁴

The second part of 'The Coming Voter', which appeared four days after the first, is dedicated to showing just how dire the results will be if the right hands fail to put the right words on to the clean paper of the labourers' mind. Jeff cries presents a dramatic picture of a countryside still in the grip of a stifling feudalism. In contrast to his many other writings which chronicle the changing temper of the contemporary rural scene, 'The Coming Voter' depicts a rural sector in which labourers continue in subservient thrall; mere puppets in the masterful hands of the transitional rural elites. Without the correct process of political education, the new voters will simply 'yield in silence and do as they are told.'²⁵ The 'mansion' exerts control over all aspects of poor villagers' lives, aided by the position and influence of the landlord's retinue: the parish clergyman, the landlord's wife, local worthies and others connected by marriage and friendship. In exercising such ubiquitous interference and control, the motive is not monetary gain, but simple powerlust. Independence is thwarted by the traditional patronage system, and the lack of alternative sources of charity. The 'feudal' pressure still evident in the countryside is frequently subtle, unspoken and unorganised, but nevertheless all-pervasive and infinitely powerful. By offending established elites, the poor could effectively 'cut themselves off from civilisation'.²⁶

This sort of intangible and insidious elite manipulation is very similar to that described (albeit with more subtlety and literary panache) in 'Primrose Gold in Our Village' (1887). But 'The Coming Voter', despite its more relentless and overstated style, has a cumulative effect. Doubtless many readers read its final paragraphs with a mounting sense of horror. The portrait of a subservient rural voter, unable to exercise independent judgement due to indirect but effective blackmail by entrenched elites, was meant to motivate Liberals to continue the necessary process of political education in the countryside. Should they fail to do so, the implication is clear that they will live to regret it. Thus although the countryside depicted in 'The Coming Voter' differs from Jefferies' other accounts of the contemporary scene, it does so in

order to reinforce the same desired end, that of independent countrymen able to actively participate in and to organise a more democratic village life. By painting a dramatic portrait of the landed elites which attributes to them a unity of motive and purpose, and which concedes no regional or local variations, Jefferies was taking substantial liberties with the truth. But readers would hopefully be moved to counter the nefarious influence of 'the mansion' by fostering the requisite political education in the prospective voters.

Although Jefferies' portrait of a rural sector still smothered in a feudal embrace was obviously an exaggerated one, motivated by propagandist aims, his call for ongoing Liberal input in the countryside was well taken. With the historian's benefit of hindsight, it is evident that after the Liberals failed to maintain the momentum in the countryside, there was a tendency to revert to tried and tested ways. Despite vast changes in education, local government, and the considerable decline in parochial paternalism which accompanied the agricultural depression, the notion of an 'agricultural interest' proved remarkably resilient. Rural life and culture was not, as so many writers including Jefferies had hoped and predicted, suddenly transformed into a network of stoutly independent and self-governing labourer-dominated village councils in the aftermath of the extended franchise. But neither were the new voters cowed into submission by a covertly feudal ethos. The reality was predictably more complex. What is perhaps most interesting and most telling about a piece of political journalism such as 'The Coming Voter' is the insight it provides into the tremendous importance which contemporaries accorded to the Third Reform Act; to both the hopeful expectation and the dread which accompanied its passing.

NOTES

1. Richard Jefferies, 'The Future of Country Society', *New Quarterly*, July 1877, in *Landscape and Labour*, Introduction by John Pearson (ed.), Bradford-on-Avon, 1979, pp 88-9.
2. Richard Jefferies, *Hodge and His Masters* [1880], Vol.2 Chap. X, or Chap. XXV.
3. Entry of 16 April 1880 in Richard Jefferies, *The Nature Diaries and Note-books of Richard Jefferies*, S J Looker (ed.), London, 1948, p 94.
4. Richard Jefferies, 'The Wiltshire Labourer' in *The Hills and the Vale*, Introduction by Edward Thomas, London, 1909, pp 266-7.
5. Richard Jefferies, 'After the County Franchise', *Hills and Vale*, p 244.
6. *ibid*, p 226.
7. Edward Thomas, *Richard Jefferies, His Life and Work*, London, 1909, p 224.
8. Richard Jefferies, *The Dewy Morn* [1884] Chap. XXXV.
9. For an insight into how land issues and the desire to regenerate the countryside interacted with contemporary politics, see Avner Offer, *Property and Politics 1870-1914, Landownership, Law, Ideology and Urban Development in England*, Cambridge, 1981.
10. Edward Thomas, Introduction to *Hills and Vale*, p xix.
11. *ibid*.

12. Anonymous article entitled 'Electoral Reform', *Spectator*, 9 Feb. 1884, p 4.
13. Representation of the People Bill, 24 March 1884, *Hansard*, vol. 286, 624 and 633. Lord John Manners (1818-1906) was one of the members of the 'Young England' party of the 1840s, which aimed to supplant Whig and middle-class predominance in politics and society by setting aristocracy at the head of a movement for raising the intellectual and material condition of the labourers. At the time of the debate over the Representation of the People Bill, Manners held the seat for North Leicestershire.
14. *Hansard*, vol. 286, 1199. Sir Robert Peel (1822-1895), third baronet, was the Conservative member for Huntingdon in 1884. He was the eldest son of the great Conservative statesman Sir Robert Peel (1788-1850).
15. R K Webb, *Modern England, from the Eighteenth Century to the Present*, London, 1981, p 427.
16. Under the terms of the 1872 Ballot Act voting was to be done privately by ballot, whereas formerly it had been openly in public view. The purpose of the ballot was to prevent corruption and to free voters from intimidation and influence.
17. Arnold was the grandson of Thomas Arnold of Rugby, nephew of Matthew Arnold and younger brother of Mrs Humphrey Ward.
18. David Ayerst, *Guardian, Biography of a Newspaper*, London, 1971, p 232.
19. *ibid*, p 207.
20. Richard Jefferies, 'The Water Colley', *Manchester Guardian*, 31 Aug. 1883; *The Life of the Fields*.
21. Richard Jefferies, 'The Coming Voter I', published in this issue.
22. Jefferies is referring here to the National Agricultural Labourers Union, which under the leadership of Joseph Arch, campaigned for higher wages in the early 1870s. For an account of the trials and tribulations of the movement, see Arch's colourful *From Ploughtail to Parliament* (1898).
23. The Coming Voter I'.
24. *ibid*.
25. The Coming Voter II'.
26. *ibid*.

Dr Morrow has just completed a thesis on four late-19th century and early-20th century rural writers: Jefferies, Hardy, Haggard and Sturt. She is presently employed by the Wellington Museum in New Zealand.

Richard Jefferies, Bevis and Children's Literature

Peter Hunt

Every lecturer who comes to talk to a specialist society should declare his or her credentials. My earliest memory of Jefferies is reading the haunting beginning of *The Amateur Poacher*:

They burned the old gun that used to stand in the dark corner up in the garret, close to the stuffed fox that always grinned so fiercely... [He] mounted guard over the old flintlock that was so powerful a magnet to us in those days. Though to go up there alone was no slight trial of moral courage after listening to the horrible tales of the carters in the stable, or the old women who used to sit under the hedge in the shade, on an armful of hay, munching their crusts at luncheon time.

Now *The Amateur Poacher* was never intended to be a children's book (although it is a book about youth), but it spoke to my own childhood, my grandfather's farm, and the nearby great (and empty) house with its woods and lake - and dark garrets. And I bring this up because it raises the question of what constitutes a children's book: is it the audience that decides, or is 'for children' something inherent in a text?

As a youth, I read most of Jefferies, so that when I was at University in the 1960s, when peace, love, mysticism and Zen were 'fashionable', I was able to talk about *The Story of My Heart* - and I have to agree with Richard Church, who said (on the occasion of the Jefferies Centenary in 1948) that the book 'gives the sensation of holding a fast-breathing bird in one's hand' (15).

Church thought that many people see *The Story of my Heart* as an 'uncomfortable' book - and the word 'uncomfortable' suits Jefferies very well. He does not fit in comfortably to the established literary culture. He is undoubtedly remarkable in many areas of writing - but they are all areas that have *been marginalised* by the literary establishment: mysticism, nature and country writing, futuristic speculation, and, very curiously, children's literature.

He is, in short, a marginalised writer, and his relationship with the marginalised field of children's literature is fascinating.

The original title of this talk was 'Mysticism, Melodrama, and Manliness -Jefferies as a Writer for Children'; but it is an academic occupational hazard that one is asked to supply a title well in advance of the talk's delivery, and ideas change and develop. And so I should like to explore Jefferies' writings in a wider context than I originally intended: to look at his place in the history of children's literature - which is very important indeed - and then to look briefly at a conundrum: why was *Bevis* an adult book when it was published; then for a hundred years primarily known as a Children's Book, and is now more likely to be read as an adult book? As Miller and Matthews

observed, 'It may be that the status of *Bevis* as a boys' classic will be seen as a historical phase of its reputation...' (quoted in Calder, 26).

The text hasn't changed: the way that it is read has, and to understand this, we need to look at the concept of the children's book over the last 115 years, and at the book itself - what is it about *Bevis* that enables it to be read in these various ways?

All of this is particularly interesting because of Richard Jefferies' highly influential position in children's literature. In the histories, he is bracketed with two other writers as changing the face of children's literature - Robert Louis Stevenson and Kenneth Grahame. Fascinatingly, the three key works -Stevenson's essay on childhood in *Virginibus Puerisque* (1881), *Bevis* (1882) and *The Golden Age* (1895) were not *for* children: they were *about* children.

Stevenson saw the way in which childhood imagination changes the real world: "'Make believe" is the gist of his whole life, and he cannot so much as take a walk except in character.' (quoted by Briggs, 173). Julia Briggs comments: '*Bevis* could be seen as dramatising Stevenson's insights into the nature of childhood', and she quotes the famous exchange:

'We ought to be something,' said Mark discontentedly.

'Of course we ought,' said Bevis. Things are very stupid unless you are something'

and she goes on: 'To represent the world of childhood as a self-sufficient and self-generated adventure was to find a new way of writing either *about* children, as did Kenneth Grahame...*or for* them, as did S. R. Crockett, E. Nesbit and their successors.' (173-4) Jefferies, inadvertently, did both, writing *about* and writing/or. He stands at a turning point in children's literature - and *Bevis*, in particular is important both for its content and its style.

Bevis, as one might have expected from an outsider like Jefferies, presents (and presented) an image of a free - adult-free - independent childhood. It describes real boys doing real things, and it had the temerity to show them as selfish, spoilt, savage - and, it has to be pointed out (as it is sometimes ignored), rather sensual.

All this was new, and challenged ideas of childhood-in-fiction (whether for adults or for children). But Jefferies was also a man of his time; *Bevis* and Mark behave in ways which are manly and honourable, in accord with the image that children's books had tried to give of childhood through the nineteenth century. There are references to codes of honour, to the virtues of good health, air, and exercise, and an underlying thrust of the right of the white man to colonisation and empire and mastering nature. All these themes are brought together towards the end of the book:

In those days of running, racing, leaping, exploring, swimming, the skin nude to the sun, and wind and water, they built themselves up of steel, steel that would bear the hardest wear in the world... Frances played with Bevis's golden ringlets, but did not kiss him as she had used to do. He looked too much a man. (400)

But it seems to me that Jefferies adds other dimensions - other depths -which differentiate him even further from his contemporaries. He catches the nature-mysticism of childhood - the total existential involvement with *now*.

Bevis, the lover of the sky, gazed and forgot; forgot as we forget that our pulses beat, having no labour to make them, nor did he hear the south wind singing in the fir tops... But I suppose it was only a second or two, for some slight movement attracted him, and instantly the vision above was forgotten. (392)

- and, of course, the thing he is distracted by is the Otter, which he shoots. Equally, Jefferies acknowledges that the boys are influenced by literature (not just the *Odyssey*, but 19th-century adventure in general); they can be explorers and pirates - but the difference between Jefferies and his predecessors is that Bevis and Mark subsist in both worlds: they maintain their grasp on practical reality:

'Double Bezique!' shouted Mark; 'and all the money's mine!'
Pan looked up at the noise.
The proper thing is to shoot you under the table/ said Bevis. That's what buccaneers do.'
'But there were no revolvers when we lived,' said Mark; 'only matchlocks.'
'Shovel them up,' said Bevis. 'Broad gold pieces, but you won't have them long. I'm tired tonight. I shall win them tomorrow, and your estate, and your watch, and your shirt off your back, and your wife-'
'I shan't have a wife,' said Mark, yawning as he pocketed the coins, which were copper. 'I don't want a Frances - Oh, no! thank you very much!' (261)

Rudyard Kipling is sometimes held to be the first writer to celebrate craft and industry, but Jefferies was fascinated by the acquisition of skills: how to swim and sail, and by how things work (*Bevis* can be used as a very practical handbook) such as the gun, and, of course, how nature works. With Jefferies there is none of the 'with Jack it was the work of a moment' school of writers. He is severely practical, and in this, I think he captures something of the obsessive nature of childhood. (In my 'Introduction' to the World's Classics *Bevis*, I took Jefferies to task for laboriously describing twenty tacks across the Longpond: I have now revised my opinion!)

Finally - and in this he was again slightly in advance of his contemporaries (in children's writing) - he provides a family background that is 'other' but not oppositional. Frances has a playful relationship with him, his Mother misses him,

The governor having been rowed to the island, examined the fortifications, read the journal, and looked at the iron-pipe gun, and afterwards, reflecting upon these things, came to the conclusion that it would be safer and better in every way to let Bevis have the use of a good breech-loader. He evidently must shoot, and if so he had better shoot with a proper gun. (402)

In all of this, Jefferies looks backwards and forwards, synthesising the previous century's values, and yet striking out new ground. There is a strong parallel with what was done by Stevenson to the adventure novel in *Treasure Island* and by Kipling to the school story in *Stalky and Co.* The influence of this aspect of *Bevis* - the 'content' - surfaces most importantly in the work of Arthur Ransome, who was, of course, another outsider who took a long time to find his own voice. Ransome's 'Swallows and Amazons' series features independent children in a country setting; he emphasises skills (Ransome was an authority on Fishing and Sailing); his children are very well-read; and he has realistic views on the relationships between adults and children.

It is widely claimed that Ransome was the major influence on the last sixty years of British children's literature, the father of modern children's literature (see Hunt 1992) - and Richard Jefferies might claim to be the grandfather!

Ransome was important not only for the content, ethos, and incidents in his books, but also for the style, the mode of address, the relationship between narrator and narratee. This also ultimately derives from Jefferies.

In the nineteenth century, the attitude to writing for children had broadly been one of control: the narrator/author was *telling* inferiors; the manipulation of the young was embedded in the language. With changing attitudes to childhood (children became more 'valuable' as the child mortality rate dropped and families grew smaller with advances in medicine and education), a new style developed in children's books in parallel: a new angle of approach, a new equality.

Barbara Wall, in *The Narrator's Voice*, links Jefferies with three other writers who changed the way in which children's stories were narrated: Kipling, Grahame, and Joel Chandler Harris - bearing in mind (again) that none of them, in this context were writing directly for children.

Certain books (like *The Wind in the Willows*, *Uncle Remus*, and *Bevis*) became part of a 'shared literature' (between adults and children), because the respect towards the reader inherent in this new mode of address crossed boundaries.

The complete absence in *Bevis*, a novel clearly written to children, of a familiar manner, of a narrative personality shaped for a children's story, is striking. In fact the personality that emerges from the book is that of a man so intensely absorbed in his characters that he is unable to turn expansively to his readers... His interest in his reader is very different from that most narrators display. It is much more practical, and, in a way, it is incidental. (119,120)

Whether or not we regard *Bevis* as 'a children's book', it contains many small stylistic details which mark the way in which children's book style was to develop -

from telling the reader, to according the reader respect/equality. (This is always a problem in children's books, because of the power relationship between adult writer and child reader). (Incidentally I stress the 'small' because one of Jefferies' characteristics is that he is inclined to address, harangue, or rhapsodise the reader in a way which may distract us from them).

For example, consider just three ways in which the narrator is addressing his readers in *Bevis*, and how far this demonstrates a development in relationships with them.

Firstly, here are examples of the narrator still *telling* his audience:

So they walked side by side to the willow tree; Mark, who was really in the right, feeling in the wrong. (17)

He stepped onto the ledge... It was quite easy, though it seemed a long way down to the water (it always looks very much farther down than it does up)... (31)

The tone is friendly and conversational, but the narrator seems to be still quite strongly in control.

Secondly, there are examples where the narrator seems to collude with his audience; his comment is linked closely to the needs of the audience, but there remains the possibility of irony:

Next, *Bevis* had to step into the raft again - a difficult thing to do from the tree - in order to get the cord fastened to the staple to tie it up, not that there was the least risk of the raft floating away, still these things, as you know, ought to be done quite properly. (13)

Mark was armed with a spear, a long ash rod with a sharpened end, which they thrust in the kitchen fire a few minutes to harden in the proper manner. Besides which, there was *Bevis's* pocket-book for the diary, and a large sheet of brown paper for the map; you see travellers have not always everything at command, but must make use of what they have. (27)

This device requires a delicate balance, because the adult audience - or even the child audience - may seem patronised by it. But, as Wall suggests, Jefferies became too absorbed in his material to care: he was instructing, but not as superior to inferior, but as master craftsman to apprentice.

The third device is what is technically known as 'free indirect discourse' or 'mind style', where it is impossible to assign a comment in the text to the narrator or to the character's thought:

He sat down on the stool...to think; why, of course he would fasten a rope to it, and so haul it along! (5)

Bevis wished to be afloat... Mark might appear directly; it was odd he had not heard his whistle before. (8)

This technique has become one of the most common in twentieth century children's literature. It bridges the gap between narrator and character, almost assuming an oral mode. It occurs in Jane Austen, who was a mistress of such devices - but it was also the stock-in-trade of Enid Blyton. (Hunt, 1991, 109-117)

And so (bearing in mind that he was an erratic writer) Jefferies used a combination of techniques which pointed the way to new developments in children's books, because, in short, he took boyhood seriously (or, better, as in mysticism, did not differentiate - except in terms of experience: he made quantitative, not qualitative judgements about childhood.)

By the end of *Bevis*, his technique had become very sophisticated. Note in this passage how he merges the thoughts of the boys and the comments of the narrator:

[The Otter] It must be preserved; they could skin it, but could not stuff it; still it must be done. The governor must see it, mamma, the Jolly Old Moke, Frances, Val, Cecil, Charlie, Ted, Big Jack - all. Must.

This was the cause, then of the curious wave they had seen which moved without wind - no, Mark remembered that once being near the wave he had seen something white under the surface... The otter must be preserved.

While they breakfasted, while they bathed, this was the talk. Presently, they heard the slave's whistle and fetched her on the raft. Now Loo, cunning hussy, waited till she was safely landed on the island, and then told them that dear Mamma and Frances were going that day up to Jack's to see them. (393)

This intimacy between narrator and characters is natural to 'adult' books, where peer-readers are being addressed; but it was attractive for young readers.

(Of course, Jefferies often speaks directly to adults in the same way: which may account for the ambivalence felt towards the book, and which may well account for something of *Bevis's* subsequent career.

He was a shrewd man, the governor, and he saw that Bevis and Mark had the ladies on their side; what is the use of saying anything when the ladies have made up their minds? Besides, there was this about it at any rate: they had gained the primeval health of the primeval forest dwellers. (402))

This approach to the reader, at once involved and detached - and complex, is, in actuality, more 'advanced' in terms of children's books than what are usually regarded as the great transitional figures of Grahame and Nesbit.

Grahame's *The Golden Age* and *Dream Days* made his name by developing an ironic naivete: the child voice was empowered by showing adults for what they were - but the humour came from the reader knowing more than the narrator. Here is Uncle George, in *The Golden Age*:

He accompanied us cheerily around the establishment - suffered himself to be introduced to each of the cows - held out the right hand of fellowship to the pig - and even hinted that a pair of pink-eyed Himalayan rabbits might arrive - unexpectedly - from town some day. We were just considering whether in this fertile soil an apparently accidental remark on

the solid qualities of guinea-pigs or ferrets might haply blossom and bring forth fruit, when our governess appeared on the scene. Uncle George's manner at once underwent a complete and contemptible change. His interest in rational topics seemed...to flag and ebb away... (25)

Jefferies is much closer to the mature children's book style of the twentieth century, and if you wish to read a paragraph that might have come straight out of *The Golden Age* (had those children been allowed guns), then we have to return to *The Amateur Poacher*:

The matchlock...was nearly finished when our hopes were dashed to the ground by a piece of unnatural cunning. One morning the breechpiece that screwed in was missing. This was fatal. A barrel without a breechpiece is like a cup without a bottom. It was all over. (176)

This is a kind of irony that is almost totally lacking in *Bevis*.

Bevis, therefore, is a central book in the history of children's literature, a book about childhood, a book *of* childhood, perhaps written *to* children, but not *for* children. And yet it was adopted (and adapted) as a children's book: it was seen as a children's book. It has a complex history; but broadly, it was first published as a three-decker novel; it was shortened in 1893; illustrated editions appeared in 1920, 1932, 1940, 1949; abridgements and selections were published in the 1930s and 1940s; post war, there have been three 'adult' editions (1948; Everyman 1966; OUP 1989) and a 'children's' (abridged) edition (Puffin 1973). Thus throughout its publishing history, children's and adults' editions have existed in parallel. Now *Bevis* is available only in the limbo of the cheap reprint - Wordsworth Children's Classics.

What, then, is this book? Is it a boys' classic also read by adults, or an adult classic read by children? Or, as Jonathan Calder argued in last year's Birthday Lecture, (by implication) is it a good novel which benefits greatly from not being read as a boys' classic?

This brings us to the fascinating area of children's literature, the area of literature with a fundamentally ambiguous status, the province of the outsider.

What does the adult world do with a book which is, (a) ambiguous in address, (b) about childhood, and (c) anarchic? The answer is give it to the children. Why? Because the anarchy (for whoever the reader is - adult or child) needs to be suppressed and controlled, and so we place it in an area where adults can read it safely (because it is only play, and not to be taken seriously), and where children can read it subversively (but in an uncanonical area, a controlled environment).

That is, the children's book makes safe both the escapism and the anarchy because, as we have seen, they are, by cultural definition, inferior, marginalised - able to be controlled. This stems from the ambivalent relationship that many adults have towards their childhood: Jonathan Calder said last year, 'We live in an age where childhood is almost feared/ (26) Certainly childhood seems to be widely denied and rejected: it is something we live through, grow out of: it is only a stage. Children's literature is

rejected alongside childhood, despite the fact that it is immensely influential: most readers (adult) were, after all, child readers.

The history of *Bevis* has been affected by this, and also by the fact that there are two kinds of children's books, and *Bevis* almost uniquely is both - or has been both at different times.

The two kinds are, the children's children's book and the adults' children's book. The first is validated and spontaneously adopted by the child; if we list its characteristics, it is interesting to see how many describe *Bevis* at some stage of its career.

It is not respectable; it deals with the most easily influenced parts of childhood; it concerns fundamental instincts, uncivilised behaviour, direct gratification; it is subversive, dangerous and recognises basic impulses in childhood, which do NOT conform to adult norms; it may contain the crudest prejudices; it is very sensitive to today - the current - both in terms of the culture and the existentialist moment; and in it, place is simply somewhere where things happen.

It takes a very special person to write *genuine* examples of this form of book - someone connected to childhood (although perhaps, today, it is someone who can exploit childhood). *Bevis* therefore, was a book taken up by children as a children's children's book.

The second kind of children's books is the adults' children's books, validated by adult readers as what a children's book should be - and consequently promoted to 'classic' status, appearing on the National Curriculum, and so on. Again, how far do the characteristics of this category describe *Bevis*?

It is validated by the 'culture' - male, middle-class, middle-aged; it is nostalgic for an ideal childhood, for freedom, for a safe environment, for the past; it is male centred in terms of characters and activities; it is rural; it shows what the culture thinks children and childhood should be like; it is anti-women, or, at best, women are marginalised; and it is often retreatist in the first place or made to be so (that is, read as retreatist).

Good examples of this kind of book are the work of Milne, Grahame, Tolkien and... *Bevis*. Thus we might note when *Bevis* has been most popular - around and between the wars - when confidence has declined, and there has been a longing for a golden world. At these times, Coate becomes Arcadia - always just around the corner. As Ian Wright said: 'Just back around the last bend in the road, just out of sight over the last hill, there had apparently been a sort of happy Hobbit-land, the organic community, a golden rural world without class-conflict or exploitation.' (Quoted in Hunt, 1995,195)

As we can see, what is interesting about *Bevis* - uniquely - is that it has been all these things at different times.

Jefferies, then, wrote a book which changed the face of a genre/mode to which it doesn't appear to belong, and that book has travelled through a century being read and interpreted according to perceptions which it had laid down!

However, I have the feeling that there is some discomfort about Jefferies being known for *Bevis* as a children's classic, and that really, we should be grown up - *Bevis*

should be read and appreciated as an adult book, as Jefferies intended. Why should this be so? As we have seen, the children's book is a marginalised creature, and we are rather uneasy about its association with 'childish'. After all, what are you lacking if you write for children? - children's books are therefore essentially inferior.

Jonathan Calder implied this in his talk last year. Far from defending myself against his criticisms, I am happy to accept many of his ideas, but there was one point in his argument where the whole point about the status of the children's book is pinpointed. He argues, very subtly, for the subtlety of *Bevis*, and goes on:

Such subtlety suggests a new approach to the critic. Rather than being read as a children's book, *Bevis* should be read as a novel. So easily does *Bevis* flow...that it is easy to forget that there is an author's intelligence behind it all... Jefferies is writing as a novelist, and we must allow him to have intended the effects he produces as much as we would any other author... We can use concepts like irony and truthful characterisation to explain it-qualities which we admire in other novelists, and should admire in Jefferies too. (24)

Now it may well be the paranoia of a children's literature expert that reads that paragraph as a suggestion that in children's books, intelligence and subtlety may be laid to rest. But it seems to me that it is precisely this lack of faith in children and children's books that prompted Guy Pocock and Henry Williamson in their 1930 and 1966 Everyman editions to recommend that children should 'skip' or 'persevere through' certain passages (Hunt 1989, xii). (And, of course in the Oxford adult edition, it is just such a latent prejudice that caused the editor, one Peter Hunt ((as Jonathan Calder so rightly pointed out)) to try to rewrite the book).

But I would argue that we need not worry: childhood is important - and Jefferies spoke of it and to it, in both material and in a style which have seldom been equalled. I would also argue that Jefferies's marginal, ambiguous, status is precisely what makes - or made - *Bevis* into such an important book in so many different literary fields. It is a genuine adult book (in several genres), and it is both categories of children's book.

But time passes over *Bevis*; perhaps for the time being, it will remain in limbo. It may be because it seems to be resolutely un-politically correct:

They played cards afterwards, discussing in the meantime various ways of killing the animals and birds about them... Had it been the great Elephants of inner Africa, they would have shot them down without even a thought of the ivory (352-3)

'What we want is a slave.'

'Of course, - two or three slaves, to work and chop wood, and fetch the water.'

'Hit them if they don't...Tie them to a tree and lash them...Great marks on their backs...Jolly!' (304)

Or it may be that childhood has changed again; or that education may be failing us; or that perhaps now only adults can understand the boys' savagery and its mystic link; or that only an historian can understand their attitudes, or that the countryside means little now; or only a literary education can provide the references. Can *Bevis* recover from the stigma of its career as a children's classic?

But, not wishing to end on a dour note I searched through Jefferies for a suitable ending, and I found two - after a lot of pleasant reading. The first is a mystic emblem of what children's books should be about - the ending of *The Amateur Poacher*.

Or it is the morning on the hills, when hope is as wide as the world... Let us get out of these indoor narrow modern days, into the sunlight and the pure wind. A something that the ancients called divine can be found and felt there still.

And the other represents a subversive hope which seems to encapsulate Jefferies and children and children's literature - from *Bevis*:

Poachers...get about at odd hours in odd places, and see things they are not meant to.
(399)

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