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Chapters on Churches

The Peripatetic Philosopher Among the Welsh Congregationalists

First published in the North Wiltshire Herald in a series of articles that appeared between 24 November 1866 and 5 October 1867. The articles were later authenticated to have been written by Richard Jefferies [See Richard Jefferies Society Journal 3, 1994]. The articles have been reproduced in the Society Journals 3, 4, 6 and 10.

The Victoria County History states that the 'new' Congregational Church was built at the corner of Bath Road and what is now Victoria Road, in 1866. It was demolished after 1945. The Greyhound, and the lecturer and actress which Jefferies mentions remain to be identified. No details of Jefferies visit to Wales are known.

The other Sunday I dropped into the handsome new Church of the Congregationalists at Old Swindon, and there found that the service was being conducted by the Rev. Dr Rees., an eminent minister of the Congregationalists of the Principality. The doctor's accent at first puzzled me, but by the time he commenced his sermon I was enabled to comprehend his peculiarity of pronunciation, and appreciate the powerful sermon he delivered. It is not now my purpose to refer to that discourse, but I cannot help quoting an allusion which Dr Rees made to the prophesies of Dr Cumming, who by the way has escaped the fate of false prophets of old, and has netted a handsome sum by his cleverly written vaticinations. Dr Rees alluded to the statement that the world was to come to an end this year, and remarked that a more ridiculous idea had never been promulgated. He asked whether it was likely that the Almighty had created this world and allowed it to develop for 6,000 years only to destroy it before that development had reached its meridian. We were told that knowledge should increase upon the earth, and there was every indication that this was taking place. There was, however, much to be done before the world was perfect, and we might be sure the end would not be yet. That it would come, however, was sure, for we were told that Satan was to be confined for a thousand years, which he interpreted to mean that sin and Satan would be finally overthrown, a 'thousand years' being a term used to express an indefinite or eternal period for it was difficult to believe that the great Father would perfect this world, allow a long period of happiness and freedom from sin, only to hand the world over again to the dominion of the Evil One.

But I am digressing from the object of my paper, At the conclusion of the service, Dr Rees announced that he would preach in the native language at the meeting room of the Welsh Congregationalists at New Swindon. I resolved to go, as I desired to test a theory of mine - whether an eloquent, earnest man could make himself understood to persons who did not speak his language. I once attended a lecture by the celebrated Gavazzi, soon after his arrival in England, when he spoke in Italian, his knowledge of English being imperfect. He discoursed on the Inquisition, and though I did not understand one word of his language, I was enabled to gather from his eloquence, facial expression and general action, that he was reciting some of the horrors which were associated with that fiendish invention - the Chamber of the Holy Inquisition, years later, I witnessed Madame Ristori perform in a dramatised version of the old classic story of 'Medea'. I had a knowledge of the story gained at school; though that was meagre; nevertheless, I was enabled to understand all :hat was done, and could trace Medea in all her acts until the last scene in which she perpetrated her terrible revenge on the recreant Jason.

I had heard of the fame of Dr Rees during visits to Wales, and was anxious :o hear a man whose power has such an influence over his countrymen. I proceeded in the afternoon to New Swindon and found the place of meeting - a room in the rear of the Greyhound - quite an apostolic 'upper room', to which I was guided by an intelligent, elderly man, whose praise of Dr Rees and the Welsh people soon convinced me that he hailed from the Principality. On entering the room, I found that a Sunday school was being held, a number of little children receiving instruction. Soon the school broke up, and by and bye the room filled with a congregation unmistakably Welsh, every feature showing their origin, and establishing a proof if such were needed, of the indestructibility of the distinction of race, whatever philosophers may say to the contrary. The doctor shortly after entered the room. He is a massive, almost heavy man, but an expressive countenance, and full, bright eyes, prevent any appearance of dullness. His manner is commanding, his intellectual looking head and features adding force to his character. He is a remarkable man in many ways. He is of humble origin -I believe the son of farm laborer of South Wales; his early education was neglected, yet, he is no mean Latin scholar, and long since he attained the age of manhood he acquired Greek and Hebrew, in order to have the satisfaction of reading the old and new Testament in the originals. Thus much for the man. The service commenced with a hymn in the Welsh language, and I was particularly struck with the melody of the poetry of Wales, for though the leader simply read the hymns, there was a cadence in the expressions which we do not find in English hymnody. A prayer was next offered in Welsh, during which many of the congregation uttered a peculiar sound - not the groan or ejaculation of the Ranter - which I was told meant an expression of sympathy with or approval of the sentiments of the minister. Dr Rees took his text from Samuel - 1st, chap. 10, verse 11. The preacher read the text in Welsh and English, and adopted the same plan in reference to the divisions of his subject. The discourse, however, was in Welsh, and afforded me an opportunity of testing my theory, and on giving to a Welshman my ideas of the sermon, gathered from the preacher's statement of the division, his style and action, he informed me I had rightly comprehended the scope of the discourse.

At the conclusion of the sermon, Dr Rees made a few remarks as to the object of his preaching - it was in aid of the ministry in the place where they met. He stated what surprised me: that the man who ministered to them, Mr Davis, worked for his daily bread in the rolling mills, devoting his spare time to the study of theology and preparing his sermons for them. Some times he had to lose a day's work, and it was to recoup him this expenditure and aid him in buying books that the collection was to be made, towards which a few friends in Old Swindon had given a couple of pounds. I must confess I was surprised to hear of worship in so Apostolic a manner, the preacher, like the disciples of old, laboring for his daily bread. It helped me to understand how attached are people to their own language and race. In Old Swindon is an English Congregationalist Church, and in New Swindon is the capacious Baptist Church, the principles of which are identical - save on the minor question of baptism - yet to hear their own language they are prepared to make any sacrifice. When a boy, I remember reading a book of adventures, in which was recorded the fact of a sailor who had been for years in an island, the language of whose people he could not understand, using signs to express himself. An English ship touched at the place and took him off. The first sound of his own language nearly overwhelmed him, and nothing would appease him but the sailors speaking to him in English. The Welsh language is somewhat gutteral it is true, but the poetry and music of the Principality atone for that.

I was anxious to hear a little about the Welsh people of New Swindon, and in my character as a peripatetic philosopher made a few enquiries by the way, I find that there are about 300 Welsh people employed in the rolling mills, but many of these are from Monmouth and other counties in which English is spoken. Some, however, are pure Welshmen, speaking the Celtic tongue. These chiefly form the congregation in the upper room I have spoken of, for which they pay the modest rent of £4 per annum. Their services and school are held on Sundays, but a prayer meeting always takes place on Saturday evenings, with the object of thanking the Creator for preservation during the week, and asking for grace on the week which the coming Sunday would inaugurate. Their minister must be a most disinterested man, he receiving no salary, the offerings of the people scarcely covering the expenses attending worship. As I wended my way home, I could not help asking myself whether such things are not rare. The minister of the Welsh Congregationalists is above suspicion from the simple fact that his people, however willing they may be, have not the funds to pay him, and he can have no other object than a desire to serve his brethren.

Jefferies and Birds

W.K. Keith

I should begin with a few warnings and disclaimers. This paper is somewhat self-indulgent since, while I've been a keen birdwatcher ever since I was a child growing up in Essex, I've only been able to apply myself at all systematically to the hobby since I retired. So I decided today to combine two of my main interests, although I am aware that a resident in (of all places) Toronto is not the best qualified person to attempt to do justice to the topic. So let me say straightaway that I see myself as merely opening up the subject; I'm sure that there are many people here who can offer corrections and additions once I've had my say.

But before I proceed further, there are a few words of caution that need to be voiced, since the topic contains hidden traps. First of all, it is only too easy to assume that the bird-life in the area around Coate in 1998 is similar to that of a hundred and fifty years ago - yet this clearly isn't true. Inevitably, some birds that were relatively common in Jefferies' time are now no longer to be met with. Most conspicuous by their absence, I imagine, are the corncrake, the red-backed shrike, and the wryneck. Increased building, the use of pesticides, intensive agriculture and, as Patrick Dillon reminded us last night, climate change, are only some of the culprits. On the other hand, the story isn't entirely one of loss. Some species have increased - most notably, I would think, the great-crested grebe, thanks in part to the enlargement of Coate Water. In *The Gamekeeper at Home,* Jefferies described it as 'uncommon, but not altogether rare' - meaning that 'two or three' were sometimes seen - and, alas, shot - in a year (ch.2). The decline of gamekeeping and shooting and the increase of environmental concerns have in some cases had a beneficial effect. Thus Jefferies referred to the magpie as relatively uncommon - in some localities, indeed, 'nearly extinct' (ch.6). This is not, I suspect, true today. I'd like to suggest at this point that it would be an interesting and valuable project for any local birdwatcher to keep tabs on species seen and compare these with the situation over a century ago as we can reconstruct it from Jefferies' writings.

One other general problem needs to be addressed as well: the matter of nomenclature. Both the scientific and (more to the point here) the popular names of certain birds have changed since Jefferies' time. To take a few instances, Jefferies refers on a number of occasions to 'black-headed buntings', but he doesn't mean the bird of that name that you will find in modern field-guides, an extremely rare British visitor. Instead, he means simply reed-buntings: it was in his time an alternative name now no longer used. Moreover, he also refers to reed-buntings as 'reed-sparrows'. Similarly, sedge-warblers appear in his work indiscriminately as 'sedge-reedlings', 'sedgebirds', and 'brook-sparrows'. The situation gets rather more complex when he follows ornithological predecessors in using the word 'titlark', generally for tree-pipit but possibly for meadow-pipit as well. One or two comparable instances will be encountered later.

Having got these preliminaries out of the way, let me attempt to define more narrowly the aspect of the subject I want to pursue here. How good a birdwatcher (or ornithologist) was Jefferies? What kind of naturalist was he? How does his knowledge of birds and their ways compare with that of other writers on the English countryside and the wild creatures that inhabit it? These are some of the questions I would like to raise and answer, if only in part, in the next few minutes. And I must begin with one more warning that relates to our possible pre-and misconceptions. After all, Jefferies has a deserved reputation as one of the leading rural writers of the nineteenth century. Of course, we are tempted to assume, he knew all about the birds of southern England. But did he?

It is also important to acknowledge at the outset that there are various kinds of naturalist. Thus, many of us here are doubtless birdwatchers - or 'birders' - at various levels of expertise, dedication, and seriousness, yet there are probably few who would feel altogether comfortable if they were designated 'ornithologists'. Where does Jefferies stand in this broad spectrum? At this point, other comparisons are in order. Take, for example, his predecessor Gilbert White a century before him. Compared with Jefferies, White was decidedly a scientific naturalist. He corresponded with some of the most distinguished naturalists of his day, and was seriously concerned with scientific questions: establishing the precise distinctions between superficially similar species, for instance. Even a cursory glance through *The Natural History of Selborne* (1789) will reveal his fondness for, and regular employment of, the Latin names of plants and animals. The difference from Jefferies is considerable. Or compare Jefferies with W. H. Hudson, initially his contemporary, though the long-lived Hudson had barely begun to publish before Jefferies' early death. Hudson's first book devoted to an English topic was, in fact, *British Birds* (1896), a full-fledged birdbook-cum-fieldguide that, for all its aesthetic preoccupations and frequent quotation from the poets, could only have been produced by a systematic 'ornithologist'. Jefferies didn't belong in this league; his strengths lie elsewhere, and it will be the purpose of this lecture to try to isolate them.

So much for general introduction. If we want to focus down upon Jefferies' practical knowledge in the area of birds and birdwatching the first place to turn is the letter headed 'The Birds of Swindon', which he contributed to the *Swindon Advertiser* in 1871 and which John Pearson ferreted out and published in *Landscape and Labour* (Bradford-upon-Avon, 1979).

The letter recounts how Jefferies, walking in Marlborough High Sreet the previous summer, saw in a shop window a book entitled *The Birds of Marlborough.* The author (though Jefferies never says so) rejoiced in the name of Everard Ferdinand Im Thurn, and the book had just appeared that year (privately printed, London, 1870). Im Thurn, in fact, was educated at Marlborough, and turns out to have been younger even than Jefferies, only seventeen or eighteen when the book appeared. Jefferies obviously bought it, and his letter consists of somewhat desultory notes in which he measures the writer's statements about the distribution of individual species in the light of his own observations in the Swindon area.

(Now I should interject at this point, somewhat shamefacedly, to say that I was unable to consult Im Thurn's book while writing this paper; hardly surprisingly, it isn't available in Toronto - or, so far as I know, in North America. Ultimately, however, this matters little, since my concern is with Jefferies' own statements.)

Jefferies' remarks are, we find, typical of a keen, highly observant, yet at this time decidedly inexperienced field-naturalist. Under 'woodpecker', for instance, he offers his own independent judgement: 'the gamekeepers say this bird is scarce, but it is not.' He is referring to the green woodpecker, and goes on to report that the greater- and lesser-spotted are rare, though he has 'seen both in the neighbourhood of Burderop' (65). And I, for one, would like to know if that situation still holds good in our own time. But more is at stake than just a matter of presence or absence. Jefferies also illustrates his powers of observation by recording the rather quirky fact that cock pheasants 'invariably crow at every flash of lightning during a thunderstorm - day or night' (65). And he is 'scientific' enough, after shooting a wood-pigeon, to count (as Gilbert White might have done) 'no less than twenty-four acorns in its crop' (65). The letter also contains an account of what turns out to be Jefferies' most significant contribution to British field-ornithology: his describing of a redwing's nest in Wiltshire in 1870. Several years later, he elaborated on this account in *Wild Life in a Southern County,* and earned thereby a respectful reference in Hudson's *British Birds.* I shall return to this towards the end of my talk.

At the same time, this letter to the *Swindon Advertiser* reveals some curious areas of uncertainty and even ignorance. Im Thurn's reference to hooded crows makes Jefferies wonder if these are the 'to me, strange birds visiting the reservoir here [i.e., Coate] last winter' (68). This would seem to imply that he lacked a bird-book which could readily have provided the information. Indeed, he writes in the same letter of his lack of any account that might enable him 'to identify the living creatures' he came across in the Swindon area (64). He had, however, established the identification of this species, now regarded as a mere sub-species, by the time he came to write *Bevis,* where one of the imagined islands in 'the New Sea' is named 'Grey Crow Island because a grey or hooded crow rose from it' (ch.27). This raises an additional question, however, because Bevis and Mark are building their hut in the summer, when they wouldn't be likely to see any hooded crows around.

And towards the end of the letter, we find this:

> A bird locally called a sea-swallow often comes to the reservoir after storms three or four at a time. It resembles a swallow in its habit and flight, rarely pitching, but is much larger and grey, like a diminutive gull. Two birds said to be the Great Northern Diver were shot at the reservoir last year. ... A friend preserves a bird also killed at the reservoir, said to be 'Columbus Crestatus', and evidently some aquatic bird. (68)

There is much to query here. Sea-swallows are, of course, terns. They are still referred to merely as sea-swallows in *"Wild Life in a Southern County* (ch.20), though 'tern' occurs in a notebook entry for September 1879 *(Notebooks,* 1948, 80), and sea-swallows are so identified in *Bevis* (ch.38). But once again, Jefferies' initial vagueness is noteworthy. As for the great northern diver (which I, as a naturalized Canadian, now know as a common loon), Jefferies is obviously uncertain about these birds, and is usually content with the generalized 'diver' or 'diving bird'. 'Columbus Crestatus' is something of a mystery, and it seems likely that one or perhaps two errors of transcription have taken place somewhere. 'Colymbus' (with a 'y', not a 'u') was once a Latin name for 'diver', and to this day the great-crested grebe's scientific name is Todiceps cristatus' (with an 'i', not an 'e'). It is safe to assume, then, that this is the bird intended, and pleasant to know that what for Jefferies was a rarity in 1870 was established at Coate a century later. One has to add, however, that Gilbert White would not have rested until he had made a firm identification!

In this early production, written when Jefferies was only twenty-three and still unknown, we encounter some of his most concentrated bird-notes. Similar paragraphs occur elsewhere, as in the 'Notes on Birds' chapter in *Wild Life in a Southern County.* Otherwise, we must search through his writings to come to any opinions about his expertise in this area. For the past few years, I have therefore been keeping tabs on Jefferies' references to particular bird-species, and would now like to share with you some of the conclusions I have arrived at. I should state immediately that my records are not yet a bsolutely complete, but are sufficiently so, I think, to allow me to make some reasonably confident generalizations. And at this point I should record that a book I have found extremely useful in this enterprise is Rev. Charles Smith's *The Birds of Wiltshire* (London and Devizes, 1887). Alas, it only appeared in the year of Jefferies' death, so he could not have benefited from it. But it is interesting to note that Smith based his book, written during 'an enforced holiday of six months, owing to illness' (v), on observations made thirty years earlier - that is, just at the time when Jefferies was growing up at Coate.

First of all, Jefferies tends, frustratingly, to be satisfied with generic terms when referring to hawks, owls, duck, grebes, and gulls. Most often, it would seem, by 'hawk' he means 'kestrel' - which he calls 'kestrel-hawk' in *Bevis* (ch.40). With the exception of the sparrow-hawk, all other raptors are regarded as rare. When he refers to 'wild duck', we can never be sure if he means only mallard; references to teal and wigeon are comparatively sparse, and there are no references to tufted duck or even to pochard, called by Smith 'a well-known species in Wiltshire' (488). It is odd to discover that even the later Jefferies never mentions great-crested grebes by name (they are merely 'grebes') and the same is true of gulls - unless a single reference to a 'common gull' *(Wild Life,* ch.20) is species-specific, which I doubt. For him, even when he was living near the coast, the popular but vague term 'sea-gulls' is considered sufficient.

Above all, there are a surprising number of British birds that Jefferies never mentions at all. Many of these are birds of coast and seashore that he could not be expected to see in the areas in which he lived and worked, but some are puzzling. These include corn bunting, stock dove, hawfinch, quail, tree-sparrow, coal tit, garden warbler, wood warbler, lesser whitethroat, and woodlark. One suspects that all of these must have occurred, if only occasionally, in this area of Wiltshire in Jefferies' time. So far as the lesser whitethroat is concerned, for instance, Smith considered it, in relation to the common or greater whitethroat, 'quite as common in Wiltshire, if not more so' (161). Slight indications in his discussions of whitethroats suggest that Jefferies may have observed both birds at various times without knowing of the distinction.

There are some excuses for Jefferies, of course. As Hudson points out in *British Birds,* even Gilbert White was unaware of the garden warbler, and Smith notes that this species and the two whitethroats 'are indiscriminately called "Nettle Creepers" by our Wiltshire lads' (159). Jefferies may well have been among them. However, just in case you think I'm belittling Jefferies' abilities as a naturalist, it is to his credit that the blackcap was familiar to him, since Hudson also observes (and within a decade of Jefferies' death) that 'it appears to be unknown to the country people'. One may also forgive him for not distinguishing between woodlarks and skylarks (to tell you the truth, I've never managed that feat myself!). Hudson agrees that most people confuse the two birds, but in this case White was well aware of the difference. Similarly, to this day many birdwatchers miss the wood warbler (again, I certainly did when I was growing up in this country). Hudson describes it as 'little known, or not known, to most people' - yet, given White's fascination with separating chiffchaff, willow warbler, and wood warbler, it's a bit surprising that Jefferies seems innocent of its existence.

Jefferies' omissions, then, can be as revealing as his inclusions. In *British Birds,* Hudson opens his discussion of the tree-sparrow as follows: 'By a careless observer the tree-sparrow would, in most cases, be taken for a house-sparrow, and not looked directly at.' One must assume that Jefferies, generally a most careful observer, in this case erred, though to be fair Smith describes it as 'very local' in Wiltshire (197). In connection with his apparent overlooking of the corn-bunting, which Smith calls 'extremely common, especially in the vast tracts of arable land on our downs' (168), I note with interest the following notebook entry for 8 June 1879, while Jefferies was living at Surbiton: 'Bird in road, brown, size of yellowhammer, bill pale yellow' (55). Most probably a corn-bunting, I would think, though it's surprising that Jefferies was unable (or didn't choose) to identify it. Consider also another entry just a month later, 15 July 1879: 'There seems three wagtails here, a grey sort: the usual wagtail, and the yellow sort' (65). This implies that he was hitherto unfamiliar with the grey wagtail, which he doesn't mention, I think, in his published writings until the late essay The Coming of Summer'. It may also be worth mentioning at this point that Smith describes the golden plover as a bird any Wiltshire sportsman would know in winter (380), but Jefferies only mentions it after his visit to Somerset to write *Red Deer* (ch.8).

Let me now turn to further examples where Jefferies' terminology can lead to problems. On$_w$a number of occasions he refers to 'furze-chats'. William Yarrell (in his *History of British Birds,* 1839-43), Smith, and Hudson all accept the term as referring to the whinchat. Jefferies, however, clearly associated it with the stonechat in two notebook entries. In one, this is implied by the description: 'head and part of neck black' (48); in the other it is spelled out: 'Stonechat, brown on branch of thistle (in bloom): furze-chat' (68). One wants to assume that, when he employs the term 'furze-chat', he is consistently referring to the stone-chat, but one can't be absolutely sure. However, all his specific references to whinchats date from about 1883 onwards, so perhaps he hadn't encountered this bird in Wiltshire. Smith, incidentally, regards the stone-chat as more common in Wiltshire. Local birders can judge the likelihood of this better than I can.

While on the subject of 'chats', mention must be made of a decided confusion over the dialect phrase 'horse-matcher'. In *Wild Life* (ch.10) Jefferies refers specifically to 'horse-matchers or stonechats', and this remark is quoted as authoritative by Smith in *The Birds of Wiltshire* and (more significantly) by G. E. Dartnell and E. H. Goddard in their scholarly *Glossary of Words used in the County of Wiltshire* published by the English Dialect Society in 1893. Yet in *Bevis,* when Mark refers to a horse-matcher, Jefferies is careful to explain that he means 'the bold hedge-hawk or butcher bird' (ch.40) - in other words, the red-backed shrike. I have not found any such identification elsewhere, and it is possible that Jefferies was the victim of a memory-slip here. Hudson, by the way, adds to the confusion in *Afoot in England* (ch.12) by glossing 'horse-maggers' as wheatears - and in Wiltshire, no less!

Once again, however, I don't want to be misunderstood. Far be it from me to criticize Jefferies; I'm merely pointing out that he wasn't a naturalist in the line of White and Hudson. He seems to have learned his birds as any countryman used to do, from his elders - including, doubtless, Keeper Haylock. If we examine his early writings with care, we find that the information concerning birds is essentially a countryman's information: what has been observed and what is believed in the village. In his self-consciously literary essays, he shows off his classical and biblical learning and his familiarity with the better-known poets and with history, but he shows no signs of having made a special study of ornithology. There seems to be no evidence of academic learning about such matters as bird anatomy or bird behaviour.

The section in the opening chapter of *Wild Life in a Southern County* devoted to how the different species of birds fly is a case in point:

> Blackbirds will cruise along the whole length of a hedge before finding a bush to their liking; they look in several times ere finally deciding. Wood-pigeons will make straight for a tree, and slacken speed and show every sign of choosing it, and suddenly, without the slightest cause apparently, go half a mile further, (ch.l)

Or take the following passage from the 'Notes on Birds' chapter:

> The cuckoo flies so much like a hawk, and so resembles it, as at the first glance to be barely distinguishable; but on watching more closely it will be seen that the cuckoo flies straight and level, with gentle fluttering of the wings, which never seem to come forward, so that in outline he resembles a crescent, the convex side in front, (ch.16)

'... on watching closely' is the key.

In the same chapter, irritatingly rambling if read as 'literature' but fascinating as a hoard of personal observation, one finds the fuller description of his discovering a redwing's nest, a passage which seems to me a classic of its kind. I quote at length, though I have still condensed somewhat:

> . . .the redwing is one of our most prominent winter visitors. Flocks of redwings and fieldfares . .. come as winter approaches, . . . leave as it begins to grow warm. . . But one spring - it was rapidly verging on summer - I was struck day after day by hearing a loud, sweet, but unfamiliar note in a certain field. Fancying that most bird notes were known to me, this new song naturally arrested my attention. In a little while I succeeded in tracing it to an oak tree. I got under the oak tree, and there on a bough was a redwing singing with all his might. It should be remembered that neither redwing nor fieldfare sings during the winter; they of course have their 'call' and cry of alarm, but by no stretch of courtesy could it be called a song. But this redwing was singing -sweet and very loud, far louder than the old familiar notes of the thrush. The note rang out clear and high, and somehow sounded strangely unfamiliar among English meadows and English oaks.
>
> Then, looking further and watching about the hedges there, I soon found that the bird was not alone - there were three or four pairs of redwings in close neighbourhood, all evidently bent on remaining to breed. To make quite sure I shot one. Afterwards I found the nest, and had the pleasure of seeing the young birds come to maturity and fly. (ch.16)

His shooting of the bird to 'make quite sure' offends our modern sensibilities, but we should remember that this was sanctioned ornithological practice in the period and that White (though not, of course, Hudson) would have done the same. It should not be allowed to spoil our appreciation of an extremely skilful passage. Jefferies reproduces not merely the observed facts but the circumstances of discovery; as readers we share his surprise and excitement. I find it odd that he doesn't provide details about the nest and eggs - rare information it would have been a privilege to have; in the 'Birds of Swindon' letter, however, he does remark that the nest 'was built at the side of an ash pollard, at some considerable height, and much resembled a blackbird's nest' (67). But the account of finding and responding to something almost unprecedented couldn't, I think, have been presented better. As he goes on to say, '[t]here may have been other instances recorded but what one sees oneself leaves so much deeper an impression.' More to the point, Jefferies communicates that impression.

In his later work, the references become more speculative. I strongly suspect that, as soon as Jefferies became established as a writer on country subjects living near London, he realized he would have to bolster his rural lore with a rather more academic mastery of the subject. Certainly, we find him alluding to a larger range of species, as if he has been reading up on birds and has placed his individual knowledge on a more solid intellectual footing. Here, for example, are two passages from the late essay 'Birds of Spring' *(Hills and the Vale).* The first is superficially similar to the passage I have just quoted: 'Meadow pipits are not migrants in the sense that the swallows are; but they move about and so change their localities that when they come back they have much the interest of a spring-bird.' This comment is based upon observation, to be sure, but also contains the results of a thinking mind pondering on what he has observed within the context of what he knows - academically, as it were - about migration. The second passage carries the process still further:

> It might be said that the spring-birds begin to come to us in the autumn, as early as October, when hedge-sparrows and golden-crested wrens, larks, blackbirds, and thrushes, and many others, float over on the gales from the coasts of Norway. Their numbers, especially of the smaller birds, such as larks, are immense, and their line of flight so extended that it strikes our shores for a distance of two hundred miles. The vastness of these numbers, indeed, makes me question whether they all come from Scandinavia. That is their route; Norway seems to be the last land they see before crossing; but I think it possible that their original homes may have been further still.

Jefferies has, of course, read about this route rather than observing it. This is ornithological speculation, not a field report.

Given Jefferies' deteriorating health, this process was inevitable. As his capacity for individual observation decreased, he had to fall back on book-learning. Examples turn up in the oddest places. At one point in *Bevis,* he writes of a cat-tail swamp: 'It would have been the very haunt of the bearded-tit had not that curiously-marked bird been extinct on the shores of the New Sea' (ch.47). Jefferies, it is safe to assume, had never seen a bearded tit; the remark is a product of his reading. It is, I think, the only reference to this bird in the whole of Jefferies' work, and it would not have appeared a few years earlier. His later writings make up for what they lose in first-hand observation by incorporating his newly acquired knowledge. An essay like 'Nature and the Gamekeeper' *(The Life of the Fields),* for instance, concerns itself with birds that have been persecuted, and in some cases extirpated. Here we find references to birds such as capercaillie, cross-bill, hen harrier, hoopoe, golden oriole, red-legged partridge, waxwing, which he never mentions elsewhere and, at least in most cases, had never seen in the wild. A very late essay indeed, 'Conforming to Environment' *(St. James's Gazette,* 24 June 1886), only recently proven to be definitely Jefferies' work, even contains a reference to the rose-coloured pastor, now called the rose-coloured starling, a very occasional straggler from eastern Europe of which many British amateur naturalists are unlikely to have heard.

In an undated letter replying to an enquiry, written from Eltham so between mid-1884 and mid-1885, Jefferies recommended a number of bird books, notably F. O. Morris's *History of British Birds (Field and Farm,* 45). That he knew *about* such books is not in question, but we have no definite proof, so far as I know, that he owned any. Curiously enough, his son Harold recalled books on grasses (which he mentions himself in "The July Grass'), butterflies, ants, bees, and wasps, but seemingly had no recollection of a handbook devoted to birds (see *Concerning Richard Jefferies, by Various Writers,* ed. S. J. Looker, 1948,20). Characteristically, Jefferies tells his correspondent: 'I much fear that you will not get precisely what you wish for' - and one remembers his complaints about botanical guides in 'Nature and

Books' *(Field and Hedgerow):* 'So many, many books, and such a very, very little bit of nature in them!' And, a little later: 'I want the inner meaning and understanding of the wild flowers in the meadow.' He wanted the same for the wild birds. That is why, perhaps, he is at his best when explaining the movement and flight of birds.

To sum up, then, Jefferies was never a systematic, scientific naturalist. His knowledge of birds was not especially remarkable, and he had gaps that might well embarrass an expert birder of the present day. But as an observer, as someone capable of drawing conclusions from what he observed, and, above all, as someone capable of recreating what he had observed so closely in the imagination of others, he was unparallelled.

Lecture delivered on 15 August 1998 as part of the Richard Jefferies Society Birthday Festival.

The Art and Craft of Richard Jefferies

John Savage

When I agreed to give this lecture I had no illusions that it would be easy. But I looked forward to some enjoyable intellectual effort. I rediscovered Richard Jefferies; it was a labour of love and an intensely enjoyable experience, deeply satisfying intellectually and emotionally.

I decided that I would limit myself to *Wood Magic*, *Bevis* and *The Story of My Heart* and one essay, 'My Old Village'. I shall consider how Jefferies structures his writing, and how he creates a strong emotional response in the reader; and I shall focus largely on the mystical experiences that link the three books.

> One morning a large wooden case was brought to the farmhouse, and Bevis, impatient to see what was in it, ran for the hard chisel and the hammer, and would not consent to put off the work of undoing it for a moment. It must be done directly. The case was very broad and nearly square, but only a few inches deep, and was formed of thin boards. They placed it for him upon the floor, and, kneeling down, he tapped the chisel, driving the edge in under the lid, and so starting the nails. Twice he hit his fingers in his haste, once so hard that he dropped the hammer, but he picked it up again and went on as before, till he had loosened the lid all round.

What an amazing start to a book! There is no hanging about, no introduction - just 'the farmhouse' and 'Bevis'. What farmhouse? Who is this Bevis? There are no concessions to those who have to have everything spelt out for them. But by the end of the first sentence we have already learned an important fact about Bevis - his wilfulness. He 'would not consent to put off the work ...', and single-mindedly he gets down to it, hitting his fingers in his haste, 'once so hard that he dropped the hammer', and he soon opens the case.

You will remember that the case contained only a picture, which might look very well but was of no use to Bevis. Since it was 'a fine engraving of "An English Merrymaking in the Olden Time" ', some of *us* might find it of no use, too. So Bevis perhaps has a rudimentary feeling for art: he knows what he likes, anyway. But I am being frivolous. The point is that Bevis claimed the wooden case and began to meditate what he could do with it. His first idea was to split the boards - 'Deal splits so easily, it is a pleasure to feel the fibres part'. But Bevis is wise: he forgoes the pleasure of splitting the wood and decides to use the case to make the roof for a hut; then he finds it too difficult to cut stakes for the four corners. So he goes and lies down by the stream: first an insect floats by, then a twig, then Bevis decides to make a toy boat, and for almost two pages the reader is treated to a description of Bevis's earlier unsuccessful attempts to design a canoe. Then Bevis suddenly thinks what a capital raft the packing-case will make - and the reader realises how skilfully Jefferies has been building up to this *denouement.*

I won't labour the point; I will just ask you to imagine the effect that this opening chapter made on a shy and sensitive only child - myself. Bra's was given to me by my father, and inside the front cover is the inscription 'J.M. Savage. 1942'. It was wartime, and it may have been the only suitable children's book in the bookshop. How fortunate if it was! I was eight or nine; I knew nothing of Arthur Ransome, and this was my first glimpse of a newfound land where children roamed free, like the child in Traherne's 'Centuries of Meditation' (which has been beautifully set to music by Gerald Finzi). Thomas Traherne lived in the middle of the 17th century; his was a sadly short life - even shorter than Richard Jefferies's life.

> I was a stranger, which at my entrance into the world was saluted and surrounded by innumerable joys. . . .Certainly, Adam in Paradise had not more sweet and curious apprehensions of the world than I. All appear'd new, and strange at first, inexpressibly rare and delightful and beautiful. All things were spotless and pure and glorious. The corn was orient and immortal wheat, which never should be reap'd nor was ever sown. I thought it had stood from everlasting to everlasting. The green trees, when I saw them first, transported and ravish'd me, their sweetness and unusual beauty made my heart to leap, and almost mad with ecstasy, they were such strange and wonderful things ... I saw all things in the peace of Eden. Everything was at rest, free and immortal.

That deeply moving passage could almost have come from *The Story of My Heart.* I have no evidence that Jefferies had read Traherne; but 'The Child is father of the Man', as Wordsworth wrote, and the ecstasies of *The Story of My Heart* must surely have had their beginning in a similar childhood. The passage demonstrates a point that will emerge - that Jefferies, consciously or unconsciously, is part of a long tradition of English writing that celebrates the beauty of the world and man's place in it.

I shall start with *Wood Magic,* published in 1881. Like Bra's, the story starts directly, without introduction or explanation. 'Little "Sir" Bevis' is digging in the farmhouse garden, and he sees a daisy. He throws down his spade and starts to pick the daisy to pieces. We are presented with a series of strong sense-impressions - pink-tipped petals, dandelion juice, a bennet which Bevis chews until his teeth are green, Bevis's brown wrist and his still browner fingers playing with grass blades; 'Lying at full length, he drummed the earth with his toes, while the tall grass blades tickled his cheeks.' Some, at least, of the parameters have been established.

A humble-bee hovers nearby, and Bevis knows what he is saying. At first you think, How can a bee know all about a box-hedge, and a ha-ha, and a summer-house and iron railings? Then you remember that this is a children's book, and clever bees may not be considered unusual. In addition, the bee is not telling Bevis anything he does not know: the bee reflects in his speech Bevis's love and understanding of nature and of his surroundings, and his identification with them. In fact, as we shall soon discover, Bevis's life with the many creatures with whom he converses is much more real than his home life: his parents are shadowy figures, and the grown-ups - as in Bra's - are most of the time merely 'they' who do things in the background.

Throughout the first chapter we meet animals, birds, insects, even flowers who talk to Bevis. They tell him nothing that he would not have noticed - they tell him what Jefferies would like his young readers to notice - and one is tempted at first to assume that the farm is a miniature version of Isaiah's Peacable Kingdom - except that there 'the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox, and they shall not hurt nor destroy'; more realistically, Jefferies does not play down the redness in tooth and claw: there is killing for food, and, because the various creatures speak and act like humans, there is also cruelty. In fact, the various creatures are so like humans that young readers, as with Aesop's *Fables*, should learn moral lessons about human behaviour. Bevis himself is not above beating and bullying his dog Pan; and the swallow, quite rightly, does not trust Bevis since he stole her eggs last year. But the essential unity of nature on the farm is crystallised by a remark made by the squirrel, who looks at Bevis asleep under an oak tree and 'knew exactly how Bevis felt -just like he himself did when he went to sleep'.

As a result of wandering far and falling asleep, Bevis is missed at home, and farm-workers are sent to look for him. The incident is related casually, as if it is a nuisance rather than an anxiety, but it does give Jefferies the opportunity to make the point, through Jefferies's papa, that Bevis may have gone to look at the signpost and the road to Southampton: 'Bevis was full of the ships'. So Bevis, who is, of course, an idealised Jefferies, is already feeling the call of the sea.

I would like to quote two simple examples of Jefferies's style as a reflection of the content. The chaffinch sings his war-song: notice the variety and the rhythm of the phrases. 'I am the lord of this tree; every bough is mine, and every leaf, and the wind that comes through it, and the sunshine tha.t falls on it, and the grass underneath it - all this is mine.' The last sentence of his song is more banal and less poetic - but it does have its own dynamic rhythm: 'Be careful that none of you come inside the shadow of it, or I shall peck you with all my might.' This will no doubt remind some of you of Ted Hughes's 'Hawk Roosting' (1960):

> I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed ...
> The convenience of the high trees! ...
> My feet are locked upon the rough bark ...
> I kill where I please because it is all mine.

And listen to the sparrows a few paragraphs on; Jefferies catches exactly what Yeats calls 'The brawling of the sparrows': 'Immediately afterwards ten sparrows came from the house-top into the bushes, chattering and struggling all together, scratching, pecking, buffeting, and all talking at once.'

The chapter ends with a paragraph that looks forward to *The Story of my Heart:* 'He heard the bees say that there were such quantities of flowers on the hills, and such pleasant places, and that the sky was much more blue up there, and he thought if he could he would go to the hills soon.'

Later on, Bevis meets a grasshopper, whose words are, again, close to *The Story of My Heart*, and also to what the wheat says in the essay 'Saint Guido', from *The Open Air*, written three years later, in 1884: Tell me, now, is there anything so beautiful as the sunshine and the blue sky, and the green grass, and the velvet and blue and spotted butterflies, and the trees which cast such a pleasant shadow and talk so sweetly, and the brook which is always running? I should like to listen to it for a thousand years.' The grasshopper has no time for the ants, which are always - thriftily - laying up their store, while he has a quite different philosophy: T do not lay up any store, because I know I shall die when the summer ends, and what is the use of wealth then? My store and my wealth are the sunshine, dear, and the blue sky, and the green grass, and the delicious brook who never ceases sing, sing, singing all day and night.'

I do not intend to discuss the animal stories - they are not germane to my thesis; I will merely say that *Wood Magic* is not an earlier 'Winnie the Pooh' 45 years before its time; it is an experiment in showing the oneness of nature, with all its beauty, its interdependence and its heartlessness. But there is a sub-plot, as it were, of Hardyesque coincidences and tragedies, of which the story of the flint is a good example, and the sad story of the locket in the tree is the climax. It is an extraordinary book, and I cannot agree with the critic from *The Spectator*, who called it 'startlingly beautiful' - it has many beauties, but it is too tough, too distressing, to be that. But he does say, 'this is not a book for the woolly ones'.

Jefferies has a preoccupation with the four elements. Bevis is sharp enough to notice that one element has not yet been mentioned by the squirrel who has told him warning tales: '"But", said Bevis, who had been listening very carefully, "you have ...told me about the earth, and the water, and the fire, but you have not said anything about the wind."' The squirrel agrees, but he does not tell Bevis the whole truth: '"You need never be afraid of the wind, for he blows so sweetly . . .and fills you with life, and joy, and happiness."' He admits that the wind can blow trees down; but he blames the trees for this, because if they do fall, it must be because they are 'malice-minded and rotten at the heart.' This passage is clearly a preparation for the beautiful ending of the book.

A similar passage occurs later about the brook, who speaks to Bevis in long, delicate sentences that convey the sense of everlasting flowing: '"Sometimes I sing to the wind, who loves me most dearly, and will come to me everywhere, in places where the sun cannot get."' You are not surprised to find that the brook also sings to the sun and to the earth, so all four elements are again involved. The brook flows and sings endlessly; '"I remember, I have seen you before; it was so many, many thousands of years ago."

"I do not believe it; you are babbling, Brook."

"There is no such thing as time, Bevis my love; there never was any time, and there never will be; the sun laughs at it, even when he marks it on the sundial. Yesterday was just a second ago, and so was ten thousand years since, and there is nothing between you and then."' This theme recurs later in the book.

I do not intend to say much more about *Wood Magic,* but before I move on to *Bevis* I should like to say something about the different styles of the two books. Compared with the open, graphic style of *Bevis, Wood Magic* is rather formal, with the slightly remote quality of a fairy tale; the syntax is fairly complex - rather too much so for a young child, possibly - and it contains some difficult vocabulary. In addition, the stories themselves seem strangely sad and tragic for a children's book. But its overall effect is moving and thought-provoking. The last chapter contains Bevis's dialogue with the wind, which is tenderly beautiful. There is only time for a flavour of it.

> 'In the morning, dear, get up as quick as you can, and drink me as I come down from the hill. In the day go up on the hill, dear, and drink me again, and stay there if you can till the stars shine out, and drink still more of me.
>
> 'And by and by you will understand all about the sun, and the moon, and the stars, and the earth which is so beautiful, Bevis ... Come up to me upon the hills, and your heart will never be heavy, but your eyes will be bright, and your step quick, and you will sing and shout...'
>
> 'So I will,' said Bevis, T will shout Holloa!' and he ran on to the top of the little round hill... and danced about on it as wild as could be.
>
> 'Dance away, dear/ said the wind, much delighted. 'Everybody dances who drinks with me.'

Just before the end of the book, Bevis - the little Sir Bevis, aged about six - has a mystical experience just like those recorded in *The Story of My Heart.* He sits down on the wild thyme, and the wind sings to him, and 'he felt with his soul out to the far-distant sun just as easily as he could feel with his hand to the bunch of grass beside him.' A similar experience occurs to the older Bevis in the book *Bevis,* and it is described in very similar language. The book ends with Bevis and the wind promising to meet again on the hilltop - and Jefferies kept that promise later in his life.

Wood Magic is not a novel in the normally accepted sense. Traditionally, novels and similar literary forms are generally accepted to have a beginning, a middle and an end; *Wood Magic* is all middle - though with huge variety in it. The last chapter has a valedictory quality, and the book ends with Bevis going down the hill to join his father, but that is only a rounding-off device.

Bevis has exactly the same lack of structure. As we have seen, it begins - or rather, starts - with no introduction, and Chapter 1 could just as well be Chapter 2 or Chapter 3. It is a slice of life from May to January; Bevis learns a lot, but, apart from becoming more self-reliant and, apparently, more grownup during the camp on the island, there is no character development, and there has been no moral crux or crisis. I put this forward as a fact and not a criticism. Events occur just as they do in life, and, except that the book ends in winter, it seems like an endless summer holiday in which the sun shines virtually all the time. School is never mentioned, and everyone seems to be free all day. That is part of the wondrous appeal of the book. But I do not know how a modern child would react to it: perhaps, like Molesworth, he would regard Bevis as a weedy wet, always saying 'Hallo, trees, Hallo, sky.'

Bevis is a perfectly natural child, rushing about, switching activities enthusiastically, getting tired; but he has been given sound advice by his 'Governor', and it has been firmly implanted in him that 'these things, you know, ought to be done quite properly.' He is also amazingly well-read: just consider the books he takes with him to the island - 'The Odyssey', *Don Quixote,* ballads, *Faust* and the poems of Shakespeare. He also loves the stars and knows all the constellations, and he knows about the satellites of Jupiter; he cleverly uses the Pole Star to mark noon on his sundial. Mark is not much more than a foil to Bevis - a nice enough boy, but someone against whom Bevis can continually test himself. But there is a selfless quality about each:

'All his heart was full of Bevis, it was not his own success, it was Bevis's victory that he rejoiced in.'

'All he wished was that Mark was with him to share the pleasure.'

But Bevis can be bossy:

'"Who are we then, if we are Greeks?"

"I am Alexander the Great."

"And who am I?"

"Oh you - you are anybody."

"But I *must* be somebody," said Mark, "else it will not do."

"Well, you are: let me see — Pisistratus."

"Who was Pisistratus?"

"I don't know." said Bevis. "It doesn't matter in the least. Now dig." Pisistratus dug till he came to another root, which Alexander the Great chopped off for him with the hatchet.' A wonderful end to a brilliant bit of dialogue.

Finally - '"Greeks are not very good," said Mark. "I don't like Greeks. Don't let's be Greeks any longer. The Mississippi was very much best."

"So it was," said Bevis. "The Mississippi is the nicest. I am not Alexander, and you are not Pisistratus. This is the Mississippi."'

So who are they? One very much wants Bevis to say, T am Huck Finn, and you are Jim.' But *Huckleberry Finn* was published in 1884, two years after *Bevis.*

One of the best features of the book is the attention to detail, both of the boys' activity and of the natural world. For example, how to sail, learning to swim (a brilliant and gripping description), making the gun (vivid and graphic); but the most interesting, if not astonishing feature is the way the narrative is interspersed with observations of nature. If one extracts the actual story - the daily activity, the raft, the exploration, the shooting, the sailing, the battle, the camping on the island, the scare over the 'thing' that visits the island in the night, the discovery and naming of new places round the lake, and the final winter sailing through the ice, there is enough to make a good story for boys. But it would be only a shadow of the book as we have it. I haven't counted the relative number of paragraphs, but so much of the book is about the world around the two boys that it could be said that the natural world is as much a part of the narrative as Bevis and Mark: the natural world as hero, with what Laurie Lee marvellously called 'Season and landscape's liturgy' as the book's main structure.

It could be argued that everything that happens is an organic event springing from the landscape and the local weather; even the making of the gun is salient to the life of the farm, since most shooting was for a practical reason (though the section on American snap-shooting jars for me, because it shifts the scene to London and breaks the idyll).

The beauty of nature and Bevis's deep response to it recreate the atmosphere of the Garden of Eden, a paradisal view of the world like that of Traherne, whom I quoted at the beginning. But there are three lines in the Traherne piece that I did not quote, which give a harsher view of the world: 'I knew not that there were sins or complaints or laws. I dream'd not of poverties, or contentions or vices. All tears and quarrels were hid from mine eyes.' Omar Khayyam makes the same point:

O thou, who Man of baser Earth didst make
And who with Eden didst devise the snake
For all the Sin wherewith the Face of Man
Is blacken'd, Man's Forgiveness give - and take!

From *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (trans. Edward Fitzgerald)

It is a flawed Eden,and Jefferies does not hesitate to show Bevis and Mark as savages 'hurried on by the thirst of the chase .. .they hungered to repeat the wild excitement when the game was struck and hunted down'; but they are noble savages, sensitive, well educated, and compassionate towards human suffering: when Bevis learns of Loo's family's hunger caused by their father's drinking, 'His face became quite white; he was thoroughly upset. It was his first glance at the hard roadside of life.'

But, as the well-known piece 'Desiderata', discovered in an American church, says: 'You are a child of the universe no less than the trees and the stars: you have a right to be here . .. With all its sham, drudgery and broken dreams, it is still a beautiful world.' Jefferies strove to reproduce that beauty, and, as with all good literature, his writing is a balance of content and style, of message and medium. At his best - and towards the end of his life he was almost always at his best - his writing is among the finest in English literature. He uses the resources of our beautiful language to recreate the beauties of nature, in prose that is often near to poetry and sometimes has the rhythms of the King James Bible. There are so many felicities of expression that I can quote only a few of the score that I have specially noted.

The first is from the chapter evocatively titled 'Morning in the Tropics'. Note how Jefferies uses variety of length in the phrases, how the lengths of the vowel sounds convey lingering slowness or rapidity of movement or of thought; note also how skilfully Jefferies can manipulate lists of things, so that they take on a poetry and rhythm of their own - particularly the frequent effective repetition of 'light' in the first paragraph. We can, I think, infer from the references to Archimedes and the Sybil that the well-read Bevis knew about them, and made the connections himself; I don't think they are mere authorial decoration.

Southwards, looking seawards, instead of the long path of gold which wavelets strew before him, the sun beamed in the water, throwing a stream of light in their faces, not to be looked at any more than the fire which Archimedes cast from his mirrors, melting the ships. All the light of summer fell on the water, from the glowing sky, from the clear air, from the sun. The island floated in light, they stood in light, light was in the shadow of the trees, and under the thick brambles; light was deep down in the water, light surrounded them as a mist might; they could see far up into the illumined sky as down into the water.

The leaves with light under them as well as above became films of transparent green... every atom of sand upon the shore was sought out by the beams, and given an individual existence amid the inconceivable multitude which the Sybil alone counted. Nothing was lost, not a grain of sand, not the least needle of fir. The light touched all things, and gave them to be.

To see a World in a grain of sand,
And a Heaven in a wild flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand,
And Eternity in an hour.
'Auguries of Innocence', William Blake.

My second quotation comes from 'Bevis's Zodiac'. The much-loved constellations (in this case Orion), when they appear above the horizon, mark the passage of the seasons. Note how the sound of the words and of the phrases conveys the grandeur and the brightness of the sky, or the strength of the thought:

> When the few leaves left on this young oak were brown, and rustled in the frosty night, the massy shoulder of Orion came heaving up through it - first one bright star, then another; then the gleaming girdle, and the less definite scabbard; then the great constellation stretched across the east. At the first sight of Orion's shoulder Bevis always felt suddenly stronger, as if a breath of the mighty hunter had come down and entered into him.
>
> As the constellation rose, so presently new vigour entered into the trees, the sap moved, the buds thrust forth, the new leaf came, and the nightingale travelling up from the south sang in the musical April nights. But this was when Orion was south, and Sirius flared like a night-sun over the great oak at the top of the Home Field.

My third quotation comes near the end of their stay on the island. It is the end of summer, when there is a sense of fulfilment; signs of autumn are beginning to appear, but it is a happy time, and this passage is without the underlying message of sadness that autumn brings with it. It has all the luxuriance of Keats's 'Ode to Autumn', without the sense of mortality that tolls through the last verse of that wonderful poem. It may be heresy to say so, but I think this passage is every bit as fine and as moving as the Keats; the language is rich and emotive and it is a joy to read aloud:

> Lying at full length inside the shadow of the oak, Bevis gazed up at the clouds, which were at an immense height, and drifted so slowly as to scarcely seem to move.. .It was warm without the pressure of heat, soft, luxurious; the summer, like them, reclined, resting in the fullness of time ... A sense of rest, the rest not of weariness, but of full

> growth, was in the atmosphere; tree, plant, and grassy things had reached their fullness and strength.
>
> The summer shadow lingered on the dial, the sun slowed his pace, pausing on his way, in the rich light the fruits filled. The earth listened to the chorus of the birds, and as they ceased gave them their meed of berry, seed, and grain. There was no labour for them; their granaries were full. Ethereal gold floated about the hills, filling their hollows to the brim with haze. Like a grape the air was ripe and luscious, and to breathe it was a drowsy joy. For Circe had smoothed her garment and slumbered and the very sun moved slow.

The second paragraph is sheer music, with not one harsh sound in it; it is full of soft consonants and long vowels, and such words as brim, smoothed, slumbered, summer, shadows, meed, ethereal, breathe, and drowsy.

I mentioned the mystical experience that little Bevis had at the end of *Wood Magic,* when 'he felt with his soul out to the far-distant sun'. In *Bevis,* there are similar episodes: on the night before the battle, there is a tremendous thunderstorm, and Bevis 'fell into one of his dream states, when, as Mark said, he was like a tree.' Since this is seen through Mark's eyes, we do not learn what Bevis was feeling. On another occasion:

> He could not, as he reclined on the garden path by the strawberries, physically reach to and feel the oak; but he could feel the oak in his mind, and so, from the oak, stepping beyond it, he felt the stars. They were always there, by day as well as by night . . . The Heavens were always around and with him ... They were neither above nor beneath, they were in the same place with him; just as when you walk in a wood the trees are all about you ... so he felt the constellations and the sun on a plane with him, and that he was moving among them as the earth rolled on, like them, with them, in the stream of space... Bevis lived not only out to the finches and the swallows, to the faraway hills, but he lived out and felt out to the sky ... It was living, not thinking. He lived it, never thinking, as the finches live their sunny life in the happy days of June. There was magic in everything, blades of grass and stars, the sun and the stones upon the ground.

A second example:

> The cuckoo was gone, the nightingale silent, the finches were in the stubble .. .There was no song but that of the waterfall. Bevis sat on the raft, leaning against the willow bulwark. Pan crept to his knee. The forget-me-knots and the hart's tongue, the beeches and the firs listened to the singing. Something that had gone by, and something that was to come, came out of the music and made this moment sweeter. This moment of the singing held a thousand years that had gone by, and the thousand years that are to come. . . They were there *now,* the sunshine and the wind above, the shadow and the water and the spray beneath -that was all in all. Bevis and Mark were there now, listening to the singing, that was all in all.

Finally -

> The sun had not yet stood out from the orient, but his precedent light shone through the translucent blue... the blue of the precious sapphire is thick to it, the turquoise dull. Down

> through the beauteous azure came the light itself, pure, unreflected light, untouched, untarnished even by the dew-sweetened petal of a flower, descending, flowing like a wind, a wind of glory sweeping through the blue. A luminous purple glowing as love glows in the cheek, so glowed the passion of the heavens.
>
> 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. I do not know how any can slumber with this over them.. .The greatest wonder on earth is that there are any not able to see the earth's surpassing beauty.

Up, lad, up, 'tis late for lying:
Hear the drums of morning play;
Hark, the empty highways crying
'Who'll beyond the hills away?'
Up, lad: thews that lie and cumber
Sunlit pallets never thrive;
Morns abed and daylight slumber
Were not meant for man alive.
Clay lies still, but blood's a rover; Breath's a ware that will not keep. Up, lad: when the journey's over There'll be time enough to sleep.

from 'Reveille', A.E Housman *A Shropshire Lad*

Before I finish discussing *Bevis,* I must just point out Bevis's fervent desire to go to sea. This is mentioned, you will remember, in the episode when little Bevis is missing, and his parents think he might have gone to look at the road and the signpost to Southampton. The older Bevis feels just the same: '"I've a great mind to walk to Southampton, and see the ships. It's only sixty miles." "Well, come on," said Mark, quite ready.' Fortunately, since it would have been a different book if they had, Mark remembers that the road goes past Jack's, and he suddenly suggests going shooting with Jack. Bevis agrees, and the walk to the coast is forgotten. But not entirely, as we shall see.

The book started in May, at a time of long grass and butterflies. It ends in the winter at the time of snow and ice. But, while this structure may contain the subconscious message of the inevitable movement towards death, on a conscious level there is huge vitality in the last few pages: the writing is positive and vigorous, with strong verbs and adjectives. Bevis and Mark skate down the frozen New Sea, blown by the south wind 'at a tremendous pace', and there is 'a tremendous grinding and splintering of ice.' Then the wind changes - 'The black north swooped on the earth and swept across the water.' The dialogue is rapid: there are 8 short lines of 9 words, 4 words, 2, 6, 9, 3, 3 and 2 words; then 'ice and spray rushed up the steep sand' and 'the ice was torn into jagged bits'. 'Down came the black north', like a sledge-hammer on the anvil - a violent image, but also an image of the creative activity of a blacksmith.

'Splinter-splanter! Crash! grind! roar! a noise like hundreds of gnashing teeth.

"Oh!" said Frances. "It is Dante!"'

This bizarre piece of erudition makes one wonder whether Frances really would have read *Purgatorio.* Bevis reads Homer, of course - but that is intrinsically more likely, I think. There is an exciting description of the *Pinta* in ice, followed by more splintering, grinding, crashing and roaring - 'the horrible inexpressible noise of chaos - an orderless, rhythmless noise of chaos.'

'"Hurrah!" shouted Mark.

"Hurrah!"' That one word 'Hurrah!' sums up *thejoie de vivre* of the book.

The narrative now begins to move slowly, lingering on the birds roosting and sheltering in the boys' summer hut on the island. Significantly, the sundial is still standing, reminding us that time passes; but this inexorable fact is disguised by the absence of shadow on the dial, since the sun is now below the horizon.

> Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his means,
> Time held me green and dying
> Though I sang in my chains like the sea.
>
> ‘Fern Hill', Dylan Thomas (1914-54)

The return journey is brilliantly described: the sentences roll and rush, surge and pause. They leave New Formosa, and pass by places that have contained so many of the events of the book - Fir Tree Gulf, Mozambique, Thessaly -and finally they glide into harbour.

'Frances sprang ashore' - a lovely, evocative and resonant phrase - and is met by the relieved but indignant Jack.

'"Why, it was splendid!" said Frances, and they went on together towards Longcot.' Young love is confirmed, and we know that Bevis and Mark will grow up straight and strong. Mark will be a pleasant and right-thinking young man; Bevis will be a sensitive and a dreamer, though capable of being assertive where necessary. The future is assured; and the stars are always over the ocean.

We have seen several passages in *Bevis* which foreshadow *The Story of My Heart.* Now let us look at that most important work.

> The hills look over on the South,
> And southwards dreams the sea.
> 'Daisy', Francis Thompson (1859-1907)

Jefferies's own description of *The Story of My Heart* states: 'The author claims to stand face to face with nature and with the unknown ... to free thought from every trammel. . .entering upon another and larger series of ideas . . . outside and beyond those which now exercise us.' This courageous statement is a huge claim, so it is hardly surprising that he expressed (and felt) doubts about his success, both in Chapter 1 and in the last chapter: 'Clumsy indeed are all words the moment the wooden stage of commonplace life is left' and 'I have as it were seventeen years of consciousness of my own inability to express this idea of life.' This is, of course, a common complaint of writers. Chaucer writes, in 'The Parlement of Foules',

> The lyf so short, the craft so long to lerne.

and T.S. Eliot, in the fifth section of 'East Coker', was very specific:

> ...each venture
> Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
> With shabby equipment always deteriorating
> In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
> Undisciplined squads of emotion.

Jefferies is an effective and successful writer, but he would have agreed with Eliot when it came to attempting to express the inexpressible - in other words, his deepest mystical experiences. Let us see how successful he is in his task. 'Softly breathed the sweet south wind, gently the yellow corn waved beneath; the ancient, ancient sun shone on the fresh grass and the flower, my heart opened wide as the broad, broad earth.' That is beautiful, exquisitely controlled writing, soft, slow and gentle, full of long vowel sounds, very close to poetry. It is indeed the story of Jefferies's heart, recreating in its own beauty the beauty of the experience. 'Moving up the sweet short turf, at every step my heart seemed to obtain a wider horizon of feeling; with every inhalation of rich pure air, a deeper desire.' That is brilliant: it says everything in simple language, using mostly monosyllables, and the words with more than one syllable are simple ones, anyway, except for the Latinate 'inhalation', which gives a touch of formality to the episode. 'Sweet short turf (without a comma) not only describes the footing; it also conveys the short quick steps required to climb the slope. The similar phrase 'rich pure air' (which requires careful enunciation - which helps to accentuate the meaning) contrasts with the long and formal, but not ponderous 'inhalation'; and the sentence ends with the lovely lingering alliterative phrase 'a deeper desire', with its yearning vowel sounds. We are clearly in the presence of an artist and craftsman.

The subsequent mystical experience persuades by its utter conviction and its direct and unapologetic expression: the last four words of the preceding paragraph/I was quite alone' are transformed to the more powerful 'I was utterly alone', with the addition of 'with the sun and the earth.' We can confidently respond to such openness. The four elements are introduced: 'Lying down on the grass, I spoke in my soul to the earth, the sun, the air and the distant sea far beyond sight.' The slow vowel sounds of the last four words confirm the vastness and the distance of the sea. Each element is now mentioned, in phrases which are varied and non-formulaic: ‘I thought of the earth's firmness -I felt it bear me up.' We, too, can feel it bear us up on that solid phrase 'the earth's firmness.' He enlarges on the idea of being borne up: 'through the grassy couch there came an influence as if I could feel the great earth speaking to me.'

Solidity is conveyed by the heavy phrase 'the great earth'; the length of the sentence conveys certainty, and we feel that we can believe him.

'I thought of the wandering air - its pureness, which is its beauty.' 'Pureness' is right: 'purity' can have moral connotations; 'the air touched me and gave me something of itself.' We breathe the air, and so we have a particularly intimate relation with it. 'I spoke to the sea: though so far, in my mind I saw it, green at the rim of the earth and blue in the deeper ocean.' A long, evocative sentence, full of long vowel sounds which convey the vastness depicted by 'the rim of the earth' and 'deeper ocean'. But Jefferies is not finished with the sea yet: he goes on - 'I desired to have its strength, its mystery and glory.' The rhythm of those three abstract nouns is persuasive -just try them in any other order and the sentence limps. Finally, the fourth element, fire: 'Then I addressed the sun, desiring the soul equivalent of his light and brilliance, his endurance and unwearied race.' What a wonderful piling up of nouns! Light and brilliance, endurance and unwearied race. A phrase from Addison's great hymn comes to mind:

The unwearied sun from day to day
Does his Creator's power display.

Then comes what is for me the most affecting part of this extraordinary paragraph. I first read this book when I was seventeen, and it was a revelation, an amazement and a delight. The sentences about the colour of the sky expressed in powerful and memorable language what I had inarticulately felt: it was so exposed, but it was so true, and I was a changed person. 'I turned to the blue heaven over, gazing into its depth, inhaling its exquisite colour and sweetness.' Then comes a sentence which goes on and on, with each new word enriching it further, until it reaches its quiet and piercing climax. 'The rich blue of the unattainable flower of the sky drew my soul towards it, and there it rested, for pure colour is rest of heart.' It was like hearing the music of Delius or Vaughan Williams for the first time; it was a life-enhancing experience - and that is the word that Bernard Berenson used to define art -'life-enhancing'. For fifty years I have remembered that phrase when I have looked at the blue sky - 'pure colour is rest of heart.'

Now Jefferies winds up the paragraph with a statement that we have to take on trust: 'By all these I prayed; I felt an emotion of the soul beyond all definition; prayer is a puny thing to it.' And at the end of the next paragraph: 'thus I prayed that I might touch to the unutterable existence infinitely higher than deity.' He is here 'moving about in worlds not realised', as Wordsworth puts it. Ordinary mortals cannot follow him, because language fails at this point to convey what he feels. Even our wonderful language, which has the largest vocabulary in the world, cannot express his deepest thoughts.

But there is an ecstasy here, transport, an unashamed glorying in the beauty of the earth and of the cosmos - one can only envy Jefferies that he feels so exquisite a joy. One is again reminded of the Traherne passage, and also of the ecstasies of Gerard Manley Hopkins, who was an exact contemporary of Richard Jefferies, in his breathless joy in the harvest:

These things, these things were here and but the beholder
Wanting; which two when they once meet,
The heart rears wings bold and bolder
And hurls for him, O half hurls earth for him off under his feet.

'Hurrahing in Harvest', Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-89)

A page later he becomes seriously mystical - though he is only echoing the similar experiences of Bevis, already referred to, in both *Wood Magic* and *Bevis:* 'I felt down deep into the earth under, and high above into the sky, and farther still to the sun and stars. Still farther beyond the stars into the hollow of space, and losing thus my separateness of being came to seem like a part of the whole... My soul prays that I may have in myself the secret and meaning of the earth, the golden sun, the light, the foam-flecked sea.' Again, it is the sheer poetry of that list of four things that is so effective - the earth, the golden sun, the light (standing, excitingly, for the air) and the Homeric-sounding 'foam-flecked sea' - such an evocative phrase.

Wordsworth's Pedlar (1798) has a similar view of the world:

Oh then what soul was his, when on the tops
Of the high mountains he beheld the sun
Rise up and bathe the world in light. He looked,
The ocean and the earth beneath him lay
In gladness and deep joy. The clouds were touched.
And in their silent faces he did read
Unutterable love. (H. 95-101)

It is enormously encouraging and inspiring to find that such experiences are shared by poets and writers, to know that one is not alone. Wordsworth, though nominally a Christian, was a pantheist, and he did link his experiences with the spiritual and the numinous, while Jefferies was less precise in his relationship with ultimate being. In addition, I think it is true to say that Wordsworth was more interested in the world of men, even if he was more concerned with humanity than with individuals - 'hearing oftentimes The still, sad music of humanity' ('Tintern Abbey'). Jefferies had a deep concern for the rural poor, but his mystical experiences were his and his alone - 'Let my soul become enlarged.' In addition, Wordsworth intellectualised his feelings, and based his world-view on them: he says of the Pedlar (who is Wordsworth in disguise):

he had an eye
Which from a stone, a tree, a withered leaf,
To the broad ocean and the azure heavens ...
Could find no surface where its power might sleep -
Which spake perpetual logic to his soul,
And by an unrelenting agency
Did bind his feelings even as in a chain. (II, 349-356)

There is an ecstatic quality in *The Story of My Heart,* and Jefferies reveals an extraordinary ability to express his feelings in poetic language: 'I became absorbed in the glory of the day, the sunshine, the sweet air, the yellowing corn turning from its sappy green to summer's noon of gold, the lark's song like a waterfall in the sky.' There is an unerring sense of rhythm, a brilliant faculty for creating emotional satisfaction - and therefore agreement, conscious, subconscious or implicit - in the mind of the reader.

This passage continues with the mystical idea of timelessness that was presented to Bevis in *Wood Magic* - that the man in the hill, in the tumulus, is still somehow alive, or has only just died: '"He died about a minute ago, dear, just before you came up the hill."' 'He was as real to me two thousand years after interment as those I had seen in the body ... his spirit could endure from then till now, and the time was nothing.' This is also what the brook sings to little Bevis: '"Now there is no such thing as time, Bevis my love ... all things are as bright and beautiful as ten thousand times ten thousand years ago, which is no longer since than a second."' Bevis is healthily sceptical about this - at the age of six he can afford to be - but we have a duty to Jefferies to try to understand it, since it is clearly a meaningful concept for him. As I suggested, the beauty of the language can help us to acquiesce, even if we do not fully understand.

'Listening to the sighing of the grass I felt immortality as I felt the beauty of the summer morning, and I thought beyond immortality, of other conditions, more beautiful than existence, higher then immortality.' Unfortunately, as in the passage about existence higher than deity, those resonant phrases seem to be a semantic blank, just words. But we can be swept away by the next passage, which is ecstatic music:

> It is eternity now. I am in the midst of it. It is about me in the sunshine; I am in it, as the butterfly floats in the light-laden air. Nothing has to come; it is now. Now is eternity; now is the immortal life. Here this moment, by this tumulus, on earth, now; I exist in it.. .all is, and will be ever, in now.

There is so much more that one could say about this book; but time presses, and I shall just touch on the importance of the stars to Jefferies. 'Bevis's Zodiac' celebrates the beauty of the night sky, and the major stars are mentioned again in *The Story of My Heart:*

> I prayed with the glowing clouds of sunset and the soft light of the first star coming through the violet sky. At night with the stars, according to the season: now with the Pleiades, now with the Swan or burning Sirius, and broad Orion's whole constellation, red Aldebaran, Arcturus and the Northern Crown.

A list of stars has become poetry, because of the author's controlling intellect and his sensitivity to words. The sweetness of the sky, the fullness of the earth, the beauteous earth,how shall I say it?' Well, as far as I am concerned he *has* said it - fully, and effectively, and evocatively.

It is important, I think, not to turn away from the bitterness of Jefferies's last essay, 'My Old Village'. He had been ill since December 1881, so the three books that I have been discussing were written against the background of pain and illness. But one would never know. However, in one of his last notebooks appears the sentence, Three great giants are against me - disease, despair and poverty.' Giant Despair conquered him in this last essay, written not long before he died, in which he speaks of 'the iron grip of hell', and through which the fact of death tolls like a funeral bell. It starts, 'John Brown is dead,' and synonymous phrases recur throughout: 'He is gone through the great doorway/ 'gone as you might casually pluck a hawthorn leaf from the hedge,' There is not one left/ 'next harvest-time he was under the daisies/ 'The pickaxe and spade have made almost a full round.' and Time has shuffled them about.. .like a pack of cards.'

The theme is the sadness of memory, and the impossibility of returning to the land of lost content: 'let us never go back, lest we too die.' The sun shone there for a very long time, and the water rippled and sang, and it always seemed to me that I could feel the rippling and the singing and the sparkling back through the centuries . . .There were nights in those times over those fields, not darkness, but Night, full of glowing suns and glowing richness of life that sprang up to meet them/ But at the end of the essay he seems to distrust even his memories: 'No one else seems to have seen the sparkle on the brook, or heard the music at the hatch, or to have felt back through the centuries .. .No one seems to understand how I got food from the clouds.'

But then irony takes over, of a sort that we have not seen in his writing before, except briefly in *Amaryllis at the Fair.* There it was semi-humorous; here it is bitter and painful to read: 'Perhaps after all I was mistaken, and there never was any such place or any such meadows, and I was never there. And perhaps in course of time I shall find out also, when I pass away physically, that as a matter of fact there never was any earth.' It is astonishing, considering the desperate conditions under which he was composing this essay, that the control is still there, that the writing is still masterly. One is filled with admiration, and the unaccustomed bitterness is forgiven.

I do not wish to end on this sad note. I began with the opening of *Bevis,* and I shall end with the last few lines. You will notice that the four elements are present, implicitly and explicitly in this passage - which, like other passages from the book, is among the most beautiful pieces of Jefferies's writing. The book ends hopefully, with Orion striding the sky, the buds quick with the power of the spring, despite the north wind, the rising of Arcturus looked for, and Bevis and Mark determined to go to the sea .The last word of the book holds huge significance for Richard Jefferies.

> Bevis and Mark stayed to furl sails, and leave the *Pinta* shipshape. By the time they had finished it was already dark: the night had come.
>
> On their way home they paused a moment under the great oak at the top of the Home Field, and looked back. The whole south burned with stars. There was a roar in the oak like the thunder of the sea. The sky was black, black as velvet, the black north had come down, and the stars shone and burned as if the wind reached and fanned them into flame.

Large Sirius flashed; vast Orion strode the sky, lording the heavens with his sword. A scintillation rushed across from the zenith to the southern horizon. The black north held down the buds, but there was a force in them already that must push out in leaf as Arcturus rose in the East. Listening to the loud roar of the oak as the strength of the north wind filled them -

T should like to go straight to the real great sea like the wind', said Mark.

'We *must* go to the great sea,' said Bevis. 'Look at Orion!' The wind went seawards, and the stars are always over the ocean.

Birthday Lecture, given by John Savage to the Society at Chiseldon on 21 October 2000.

BOOK REVIEWS

THE ENGLISH PATH, Kim Taplin (Second Edition), *Perry Green Press, Suffolk* 2000. ISBN 1-902481-09-7. £9.99

I bought my copy of the first edition of Kim Taplin's book in September 1994 from a second-hand dealer in Bath. Some months earlier I had heard Kim give a most interesting talk to the Richard Jefferies Society in Swindon, and was consequently very pleased eventually to track down a copy of her 1979 book on paths to read and own. I was certainly not disappointed in my find. I was therefore even more pleased to learn that a second edition of the book was to be published this year, which would make the work available once again to what must by now be a much larger potential readership.

The new edition differs from the original in having a new Foreword by Christopher Hall, a new Preface to the second edition, and a new and extra chapter at the end. The original text remains largely unaltered.

The book is a celebration and an exploration of the history of footpaths through literature. Many writers are quoted in the book, but the author in her first chapter states that, in her opinion, there are six writers who stand out for their frequent mention of paths, who attach importance to them for their own sakes, and endue them with literary significance. One of the six (of course) is Richard Jefferies. This is not simply an anthology, however, as each chapter of the book explores a different aspect of paths as they interact with different aspects of human life. Paths as the places where courtship was carried out; paths as fear-inducing routes which had to be travelled, but which might be frequented by ghosts, hobgoblins, or more material vagabonds; paths as places where duels could be conducted; or paths as straightforward roads to and from work, are all discussed with appropriate literary illustration.

Most of the Jefferies references come in a chapter entitled 'Sounds and Scents and Seeings' which concerns the impressions recorded by rural writers. These impressions range from the careful description of the natural world as objectively witnessed, to the visionary experiences arising from the contemplative state that can be induced by walking alone in fields, woods, and footpaths.

One of the underlying themes in the book is the concept of the path as a 'connecting thread', linking not only one place with another, but also one time with another. This is another idea which permeates Jefferies' writings, whether he is describing the origins of the Ridgeway in *Wild Life in a Southern County* or feeling that 'It is eternity now' while lying on the old chalk turf of his native county.

The final (new) chapter of *The English Path* is called 'This blessing still left to us'. It is a quotation from the work of a woman born in India and now living in Oxfordshire. The chapter uses works published in the twenty-year interval since the first edition, and demonstrates that literary interest in, and concern about footpaths is as strong as ever.

Fortunately, unlike the normal English footpath, the book does not ramble. It is cleverly structured, and leads the reader not only to think more about the aspects of paths as mentioned above, but is also likely to send him or her back to some authors that had been perhaps left on the shelves for too long -William Barnes in my case. The book is illustrated with works of English artists who have found paths a source of inspiration. As in the first edition, however, these are all in black and white and often do not do justice to either the original or to the scene that inspired the work.

The disappointing feature about the new edition is the number of typographical errors that have crept in to the original text, and have not been picked up by proof readers. Edward Thomas's dates, for example, are given as 1878-1817 - a clear example perhaps of 'a life lived backwards', and on page 107, a mistake with indentation makes it appear as though Richard Jefferies actually quotes John Clare. Neither of these errors nor any of the others not quoted occur in the original edition.

In general I think the author was right to leave the original chapters as they were. It might have made the 'Afterword' seem less dated, however, if the final paragraph dealing with *1984* had not still started 'Soon the eighties will be upon us'.

The book is wonderfully well researched, without being over-erudite, and the bibliographical references at the end are an enormous help for readers wishing to read further. This new edition is thoroughly recommended to all Jefferies enthusiasts, but don't give your old edition to Oxfam. Its text is larger, and error-free, its illustrations are clearer, and it has a fine dust-jacket with a colour reproduction of a Burchett painting 'Corn Field in the Isle of Wight'.

John Price