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Machiavelli: a Study

Richard Jefferies

*This article was prompted by the 350th anniversary of the death of Machiavelli, which was to be commemorated on 22nd June 1877. It was offered to the editor of Temple Bar but was not published. The leaves of the manuscript are held at the British Library (Add. MS58814 Vol.XII), and penned in purple ink on 33 single sheets of paper along with Jefferies' signature at the end. Jefferies bases his opinion on Machiavelli largely on his work *The Prince and the time in which he lived*. He sees Machiavelli not as intrinsically evil, but simply as an analyst or historian who has concentrated on the baser instincts of man's nature. He contrasts this with the possibly unjustified Victorian emphasis on the goodness of man. The article was published in *The Nineteenth Century and After* in September 1948 with an introduction by Samuel J Looker.*

Niccolo Machiavelli, the three hundred and fiftieth anniversary of whose death is to be commemorated on the 22nd of June (1877), has been made a human enigma. As the sand of the desert in course of time accumulated around the Sphinx, half-hiding what was a mystery in itself, so an endless succession of commentators piling up their theories, have almost succeeded in totally obscuring the object of their study. His character has become encrusted with a whole genera of political crimes, as barnacles cling to a ship. Before the man himself can be observed the dust of ages must be swept away. In the ripe hour of classical antiquity the statues of the Gods were draped and gilded: in our own time we prefer to see them in their naked majesty and beauty; and so with the human actors in the drama of history we desire to note their proportions when morally bared to the eye. But how intense must have been the force of genius in a man, who in the mind of the world, has focussed upon his memory such a brilliant galaxy of names as Alexander VI, Cesare Borgia and the Medici! The moment we think of Machiavelli we remember these; a complete romance, a complete history gathers around him.

Most readers of modern literature have probably been introduced to Machiavelli by the masterly hand of Bulwer Lytton. The immortal Riccabocca with his red umbrella, his stoical philosophy when imprisoned in the village stocks, his daily study of a huge folio of the Florentine politician, his child-like personal simplicity and yet diabolical speech, incidentally conveys with artistic skill the popular conception of Niccolo. In this view the very sound of his name calls up a vision of dark deeds, midnight assassinations, daggers, cloaks, masks and poison, unfathomable treachery. But these intelligible, if unfounded ideas, have not satisfied the leaders in the perpetual controversies of politics. They have traced in the famous work known as *The Prince*—which is the basis of the present commemoration—various weighty and secret objects. Some refuse to credit the earnestness of the author, whose teachings they deem too demoniacal to have been seriously meant by a mere mortal, who could not deliberately put forth so ghastly a gospel of evil. They find a vein of bitter irony in the advice he offers to the prince he addresses: under pretence of instructing him in villainy, he really holds the race of Kings up to the abhorrence of the people. Others think his real aim was to instruct the

oppressed how to deliver themselves, since he is reported to have said that if he taught monarchs to tyrannise he also showed the people how to destroy them. He intended his works to be used in the spirit of Bertrand de Born, celebrated for ceaselessly fomenting war between France and England, and between our Henry II and his sons, that through their dissensions his own native land might remain independent. A third school maintains that the book was never designed for the study of an ambitious princelet: but is a philosophical dissertation upon the larger interests of great empires. Yet it is expressly dedicated to a prince, the 'most magnificent Lorenzo de Medici.' Lastly, an enthusiastic nation, since the aspirations for Italian consolidation have had tangible results, have seen in his writings a prophetic foresight of their present union. Reading his entire works by the light of recent events they believe his earnest aim was to teach some Italian Napoleon how to combine the petty duchies and principdoms of his time into one solid state. The last chapter of *The Prince* says as much in direct words: and there is other evidence that this was at least a distant motive, if not the immediate one. So that those who now sound the clarion, and unfurl the standard with pomp over his tomb, regard him as the Ulysses who with his cunning, as Petrarch with his song, prepared the way for those principles which through the sword of Garibaldi, and the brain of Cavour, finally triumphed in Victor Emmanuel. The ultra republicans declare that his spirit still claims the annexation of the Tyrol, the extinction of the Roman church; and build an Italian Monroe doctrine upon his remains.

Perhaps it was an instinctive feeling that he had insidiously undermined the despotic institutions which fostered priestcraft and which animated the attacks beginning with Cardinal Pole, and carried on by interdict down to the present day; when the Vatican doubtless sees in this commemoration a resuscitated anti-Christ applauded at its very doors.

When a lay reader, *i.e.*, one whose mind is unbiased by the influence of any school, peruses *The Prince* without searching for occult meanings, his conclusion is simple enough. Niccolo Machiavelli reflects his age as truly as a mirror. He paints with graphic personality the men of his day. From their actions he deduced a guide of conduct in exact accordance with their own private thoughts. He certainly describes inhuman deeds, and records a devilish system of policy: but was Defoe the cause, and did he desire the continuance of the plague because he so minutely pictured it? A man may surely be permitted to know his own intentions, and Machiavelli distinctly declares that his object in producing a manual of reference for a prince was to obtain employment from that prince—if only in rolling a stone. He had then to consider what would be most useful to his reader: clearly an analysis of the existing governments, and the secret springs of their actions. *The Prince* in short, is like the crystal balls of the necromancers, by steadily gazing upon which, the whole panorama of that period, its 'pomp and circumstance,' passes before the eye.

The man was cradled in politics: the science was a hereditary instinct in him. His ancestors with a pedigree of six hundred years, had abnegated the pride of birth to gratify a greater pride: abjuring the barren nobility of title for

the reality of power in the republic of Florence. The high office of Gonfaloniere of Justice rewarded them for this step thirteen times: more than fifty members of the family occupied various other places in the state: Niccolo's father, himself, held office. Niccolo was first a secretary in the court of chancery: next chancellor of the second court, and immediately afterwards secretary to the council who directed diplomatic affairs, when his real career began. This Florentine foreign office discerning the subtlety of his genius, and his keen observation, continually despatched him as their ambassador to the surrounding courts. On four occasions he waited on the French monarch: twice at the foot of the Papal throne: once on the Emperor Maximilian: besides inferior missions to the Lords of Piombino, Forli, Pisa, Imola, Vienna, Mantua: and above all visited Cesare Borgia, the darkest shadow of history, at the infamous and exciting moment of his life. With Ulysses, he might have exclaimed:—

Much have I seen and known; cities of men
And manners, climates, councils, governments,

and in effect, claims to place before the reader of *The Prince*, a knowledge acquired by a long experience of the times.

What order of men were these with whom he mingled; who, as we read the antique folio, steal across the page with stealthy tread, lest the jar of their footsteps should clank the steely corset hidden beneath their courtly velvet? Rude barons of an ignorant age? Nothing of the kind. Illiterate some may have been, in the narrow sense of lacking skill in clerk's craft: in all else polished, and beyond other eras, deeply versed in the science of man. If the 'proper study of mankind is man,' then never were students so learned; for never was such study so profound. They were adepts in human nature. True in the field they fought with lance and mace, possessing none of our weapons of precision: but in the cabinet and council chamber their serpent-like subtlety of speech and instinctive detection of secret motives as far excelled the blunt, palpable efforts of our modern diplomatists. At that date, the friction of personal character was paramount in politics. Full development, for good, or for evil, was permitted to those who held power in their hands. Men's minds from the highest to the lowest, were wrapped up in the aims of princes, who then had a personality hardly comprehensible in our time and country. This intense political tension—a national characteristic then and now—was a legacy of the disrupted Roman empire: whose course in its glorious days Machiavelli uses as a text to teach political wisdom. It needed a man of quickest wit, readiest resource, and keenest penetration, to cope with such giants of deceit: to steer the bark of the Florentine republic in that stormy hour: clear of the ranks of eager wreckers, who displayed their false lights to bring it on to the rocks.

See him at the Vinigaglia man-trap where Vitellozzo, Oliverotto, and the Orsini, 'lords of Romagna,' digged a pit and fell therein, caught by a cleverer hand at the laying of snares. In Cesare Borgia's train, envoy from Florence, came a thin man of moderate stature, and olive-hued cheek, watching with shrewdest eye the smallest straw that might indicate the secret policy of 'the duke Valentino's' as he is called in the *History of Guicciardini*, by Master

Geoffray Fenton, done into English, a most Riccabocca-like folio. This Italian Nimrod, a mighty hunter of men and beasts, who slew the wild bull in the open arena in sheer wantonness of strength, whose ambition as the same 'Guicciardini' says, was such that neither the mountains, nor the sea could contain him, there held high conference of state with the great barons. Reading Machiavelli's relation we see the stage whereon this tragedy was acted, the town between the mountains and the sea; the little market held before the gate on the bank of the river, those touches of local colour which make a picture live. Gallantly the show came riding on into Vinigaglia: Vitellozzo on his mule with his cap lined with green, yet in all that glory anxious, forboding his fate. Borgia received them with respectful salutations: and the three princes dismounting attended him in a private chamber where they were arrested, and Oliverotto, conveyed to a convenient place, was at once strangled, with Vitellozzo, 'his master in the art of war, and wickedness.' Guicciardini points out that it was the last day of December, as if the end of the year appropriately closed their eyes. Then Borgia turns to Machiavelli, and brazenly remarks that he had done Florence good service in putting out of the world these promoters of intrigue! The very spirit of the scene lurks in Bacon's quaint anecdote: 'Cesare Borgia after long division him, and the lords of Romagna, fell to accord with them.' In this accord there was an article that he should not call them at any time all together in person. The meaning was, that knowing his dangerous nature, if he meant them treason, some one might be free to revenge the rest. Nevertheless he did with such fine art, and fair carriage win their confidence that he brought them all to Council at Vinigaglia, where he murdered them all. This act was related to Pope Alexander, his father, by a Cardinal, as a thing happy, but very perfidious; the pope said, 'It was they that had broke the covenant first in coming all together.' Borgia wished to become the paid generalissimo of the Florentine forces: but Machiavelli, awake to the treachery of the man, naively observed that he could not see what security there would be for Florence with three-fourths of the army in Cesare's hands.

How sharp the contrast between such moments as these when men live a whole lifetime as it were in a few hours, between missions to the Court of France, and playing tric-trac with a miller and butcher! Machiavelli's fortune fell with the republic he served. The Medici re-entered Florence; he was first banished, and afterwards on unjust suspicion of conspiracy, cruelly tortured on the rack. Nothing, being proved, he was at last permitted to retire to a small country house, to struggle with poverty, and the still greater misery of inaction. He who had negotiated with Borgia, chopped wood, snared thrushes, and played tric-trac with the miller! It was then that his mind became the mirror reflecting to our time the men and deeds of his day. This is the true key to *The Prince* and other works. He tells us as much. The day, he writes, was passed in these frivolous amusements: but at eve he entered his study, changed his coarse country garb for the suit which he had worn in court and camp, and painted the pictures which have come down to us. It was like Buffon washing his hands and putting on his lace and cambric before he wrote. He idealised his age: refining its actions into a sequence of logical

thought.

To grasp the drift of *The Prince* that age must be re-constructed in the mind. Transfer the scene to England. Imagine Windsor, Reading, Bristol, Salisbury, Oxford, and almost every town of similar importance, the capitals of little separate Kingdoms: each with its own regulus, or princelet; each with its own court, army, and senate. Imagine the boundaries sharply defined, and jealously guarded: tolls and dues demanded of passengers. One result of Machiavelli's mission to Cesare Borgia was the grant of free passage to Florentine merchants through Romagna. Salisbury by dint of employing the cleverest diplomatist of the day, gets from Oxford permission for her citizens to travel northwards of the Thames! Each city had its history, not a mere antiquarian past like ours: but living memories. Each had its own war office, and its foreign office: secret councils, deep negotiations, alliances, envoys, spies, intelligence bureau. Here was endless matter for intrigue. The political problem was still farther complicated: higher and more powerful factors had to be watched, and conciliated. First, Rome, which in our illustration we may place at Canterbury: next, the French monarch over the mountains in Wales; the German emperor say at Carlisle: Venice, in the Isle of Wight: Spain, in Ireland, as the galleys came by sea to Naples. These were ever advancing and receding: now adding to their share unfortunate Italy, absorbing duchies and principedoms, now losing them. Finally, bands of Free Companies, mercenary soldiers, roamed at large hither and thither, selling their services to any who offered them gold. The noise of battle was ever in the land: the whistle of the arrow, the twang of the arbalest, the clangour of armour, the splintering of lances, the thud of the mace, the snorting of horses, the shouting of the captains! On every craggy brow stood a castle: the very bridges were fortresses, as indeed they were in our own country, and still to this day retain in ornamental form the buttresses and flanking bastions of yore.

Uneasy slept the heads which wore these petty crowns. Take the regulus of Sarum on our imagined map: call him the Prince. He has to watch the motions of his neighbour duke of Oxford: to see that he does not obtain the aid of cavalry from France to blot out Sarum: to weaken Oxford's friend or cousin at Reading: to strengthen himself by alliance with Windsor. At home he has to note the temper of his people, and the fidelity of his troops: has Rome seduced them: had Borgia undermined them with gold? Still nearer, is his son, or his wife true: is there a dagger waiting, poison preparing to slay him in the bout of festivity? How shall he work upon the secret minds of adjacent princes: by marriages, by proposing joint enterprises—how shall he foresee the chances of war, and the results of victory or defeat? None can be trusted: every man's hand is against his fellow. He can maintain himself only by imitating the lion and the fox: by mingled force and fraud. Nor is the imaginary illustration without some historic justification. Our Richard III scarcely yields to Cesare Borgia in ambitious bloodshed, though untaught by any Niccolo Machiavelli: the whole story of the wars of the Roses is a practical commentary upon the maxim to get rid of the family of the opposing prince. As for lying promises, and deceit practised upon the miserable people, read Wat Tyler's times: when thirty clerks of Richard II's chancery wrote all day

patents of pardon and enfranchisement which the moment the populace dispersed were annulled. There has just died a man, an ally of England and, but a year ago, the host of the Prince of Wales, who in Nepal enacted a *coup de main* almost surpassing the massacre at Vinigaglia. Jung Bahadoor posted a guard at the entrance of the palace of his prince, and with his own gun shot down thirteen chiefs; thereby absorbing all power into his own hands. The same conditions everywhere produce the same results.

It was for the guidance of a regulus balancing himself on the pinnacle of power with eager enemies surrounding him that Machiavelli wrote *The Prince*. Let the reader of that manual put himself in the position of one of these dukes. See him sitting down in his private cabinet, and opening the vellum manuscript on a table which also bears his helmet, and naked sword! Listen—the thrush sings below it is true: but the deep bass of the armed sentinel on the terrace hums an accompaniment. Glance from the page out of the open window, a rich blue, cloudless sky, a flood of brilliant sunlight, distant misty mountains, but on the edge of the cliff the tall towers of a rival. Reflect that one false step, one moment's over confidence, and the dagger is in your heart, or the cord tightening round your neck! Here is the book which tells you what to do: when to dissimulate, when to strike; when to assume the lion, or the fox.

After a swift review of the various species of governments, Machiavelli, by pointing out the faults of a monarch, impresses upon the Prince what he should avoid. Louis XII might have retained Lombardy had he not committed five great errors. Firstly, he increased the strength of a great power: secondly, he destroyed that of the little ones: thirdly he called into the country a powerful foreigner: fourthly he did not live there personally: fifthly he did not send colonies. Yet these might have been rectified, if he had not committed a sixth in depressing the power of the Venetians, who if they had continued powerful would have prevented others from making acquisitions. This section contains the keynote of the larger policy of Machiavelli: but for his immediate affairs the prince must have a model, and he chooses Cesare Borgia: 'for I know no better lesson for the instruction of a prince than is afforded by the actions and example of the duke.' He then comes to rules for personal conduct, and here are the darkest chapters. He places his meaning beyond dispute in these words:

I thought it better to treat this subject as it really is in fact, than to amuse the imagination with visionary models. ... For the manner in which men live is now so different from the manner in which they ought to live, that he who deviates from the common course of practice, and endeavours to act as duty dictates, necessarily ensures his own destruction. Thus a good man, and one who wishes to prove himself so in all respects, must be undone in a contest with so many who are evilly disposed. A prince who wishes to maintain his power ought therefore to learn that he should not always be good.'

Discussing which succeeds best, cruelty or clemency, he decides in favour of harshness, because fear carries with it the dread of punishment. This line of thought coincides with that in the *Odyssey*:

Let tyrants govern with an iron rod,
Oppress, destroy, and be the scourge of God;
Since he who like a father held his reign
So soon forgot, was just as mild in vain!

Princes need not be faithful to their engagements: a view that was neatly put by Leo X, who said that when a man had formed a compact with one party, he must none the less take care to negotiate with the other. Those who would maintain themselves, and those who would rise most judiciously mingle force and fraud. Of the successful prince it was truly said in the words of the old couplet:

One half the year he lives by force and art,
By art and force, he lives the other part!

The drift of the argument almost corresponds with the Tartar saw: 'If the enemy attack thy father's tent, join with them, and share the plunder.' Shrewd remarks exhibiting a keen insight into human nature occur on every page: as,— 'certain it is men sooner forget the death of their relations than the loss of their patrimony:' such is the nature of mankind that they become as strongly attached to others, by the benefits they render, as by the favours they receive:' 'either make a man your friend or put it out of his power to do you an injury'—an old Italian proverb. He notes that 'all the prophets who were supported by an armed force succeeded,' while Savonarola failed the moment the populace lost faith in him. He tells the Cardinal d'Ambroise that the French knew nothing of politics, else they would never have suffered the church to grow so powerful.

The tone of *The Prince* is intensely pessimist. He nowhere counsels evil for evil's sake: but simply because most men are wicked, and can only be governed by making due allowance for this fact. He says:

It may be affirmed of mankind in general, that they are ungrateful, fickle, timid, dissembling, and self-interested: so long as you can serve them, they are entirely devoted to you: their wealth, their blood, their lives, and even their off-spring are at your disposal. When you have no occasion for them; but in the day of need, they turn their backs upon you: Besides men being naturally wicked, incline to good only when they are compelled to it.

His view of man is the same as that expressed in Genesis—'every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.' Evil is permanent: good only transient. Machiavelli was not responsible for the state of things which led him to deduce such a theory as this. All was treachery around him, as a student of the times he could come to no other conclusion. The contrast is startling when these maxims and instructions are compared with the popular political theories of the nineteenth century which are so entirely optimist. Each race is now held capable of developing itself upon its own soil—no foreigner has a right to control its destinies. Moral, social and political progress is believed to be the normal state of nations: only accident of circumstances has ever retarded it. The weight removed the plant of freedom springs up and blossoms in peace. But, we must in justice to our author remember that the times of Cesare Borgia were not like the times of Queen

Victoria. And there is one optimist idea, even in *The Prince*: i.e., the unity and prosperity of Italy, and it is this idea that has led to the present commemoration.

The Italians do not celebrate maxims of deceit: they celebrate the politician who laboured to give liberty to their country. Machiavelli's most earnest effort during his grasp of power was the substitution of a militia raised at home in the place of the treacherous mercenaries Florence usually employed, in common with other states. To these mercenary troops he traced one half at least of the miseries the country groaned under. At Volterra for instance, a thousand of such hired soldiers, engaged to defend it, finding the place untenable, were tardy in their defensive operations: but indefatigable in their injuries upon the citizens. Finally, the besieging force, chiefly mercenaries, was admitted and then the greatest horrors ensued, neither women, nor sacred places were spared: the soldiery, those engaged for the defence as well as the assailants, plundered all within their reach. But when these men fought against each other in the open field, the conflict more resembled a hustling match than a battle, and the wounds received were scarcely more serious than the bruises borne by our football players. When Niccolo Piccinino was defeated at Anghiari,

in a battle that lasted four hours, only one man died, and he, not from wounds inflicted by hostile weapons, or any honourable means, but, having fallen from his horse was trampled to death. Combatants then engaged with little danger: being nearly all mounted, covered with armour, and preserved from death whenever they chose to surrender, there was no necessity for risking their lives.

How ludicrous this sounds! No wonder Machiavelli was moved to indignation. He saw clearly that Italy would never be secure from foreign aggression, whether on the part of France, Germany, or Spain, while her princes put their trust in such feeble defences. In order to secure themselves from danger these valiant soldiers introduced the custom of not killing anyone in battle! Their discipline, he bitterly remarks, reduced Italy to a state of slavery.

To their brilliant exploits! it is owing that Italy was invaded by Charles VIII, ravaged and plundered by Louis XII, oppressed by Ferdinand, and insulted by the Swiss.

He instructs *The Prince* to train a body of troops raised from among his own people: and totally to discard mercenaries. That famous book concludes with an exhortation to deliver Italy from foreign powers and interpreted by this the last chapter—the 'conclusion of the whole matter'—bears the obvious and laudable construction of being intended 'to teach a prince how to deliver his country.' It is in this sense that the Italians now commemorate the author: supporting this view by his work upon *The Art of War* in which he enters into the details of his system of national troops. They remember that throughout *The Prince* he teaches a reliance upon the people. Such passages are numerous: as 'the only resource upon which a prince can rely in adversity is the affection of his people.' His *Reflections upon Livy* is a long glorification of republican Rome: and by implication leads to the idea that a republic is the best form of government: an idea naturally cherished by a people who have

but just emerged from tyranny. They recall that striking passage in *The Prince* which proves that Machiavelli possessed a political foresight and wisdom far in advance of his times, since he so highly approved of a Free Parliament. France, he says, holds the first rank in well governed states.

One of the wisest institutions they possess is unquestionably that of the Parliaments, whose object is to watch over the security of the government, and the liberties of the people. ... It must be confessed that nothing is more likely to give consistency to the government, and ensure the tranquillity of the people.

There are those who consider that the evil reputation of Machiavelli is rather due to the truth and the good in his writings than to the mischievous character of his maxims: the vast vested interests he attacks are not famous for forgiveness. The spurious letter to Zanobius is so far valuable that it sums up succinctly the chief reasons why he was condemned, and one of the most important is because in some places 'I vilify the church as author of all the misgovernment of the world.' The strongest of these passages appears to be where he writes:

The church therefore having never been powerful enough to subjugate all Italy, and having prevented any other from occupying it, has been the cause, of this country's never being united under one chief, but continued divided amongst a great number of petty princes. Such is the cause of the weakness and dissension that has rendered it the prey, not only of foreign powers but of whoever chose to attack it.

Were the see of Rome removed to Switzerland, he says, where manners are so simple and pure, it would speedily corrupt them! The Vatican is hardly likely to pardon this language at the present moment: but it affords farther ground why those who have seceded from her pale should hold the memory of the writer in honour.

In personal character, Machiavelli presented remarkable patience and fortitude: both physical and mental. When on the cruel rack the levers were turned six successive times: but could not get from him one word that would implicate either himself, or others. His mind rose superior to the superstitions of his age as is clearly shown in the chapter of *The Prince* discussing how far Fortune influences events, and how far she may be resisted. He is of opinion that the mind may counteract ill luck and fight chance successfully: and the whole chapter is in singular contrast with the essay of our own Bacon, who inclines the other way, pointing out that those who have attributed so much to their own efforts have rarely prospered long. Timoleon never won after his boasted declaration that in his triumph Fortune had no share, and Sylla preferred the title of Felix to any other.

The amusing story of Belphegor shows that Machiavelli possessed a quiet satirical humour which would have been appreciated in these days, when it is fashion to rail at women, and the Divorce Court is in full vigour. The scene opens in Hades, where Pluto is astounded at the number of souls which descend complaining that they have been sent thither by their wives. His council decide that one of their number shall ascend to earth, take the form of man, and essay matrimony as an experiment, but so terrible is the reputation of that condition that the Demons shrink from the task, and lots have to be

resorted to. The lot falls upon Belphegor, who accordingly takes the shape of a man and with it a man's passions and feelings, and seeks the upper air. He assumes the name of Roderigo and is furnished with 100,000 ducats in order to ruffle it gallantly. Visiting Florence he falls in love with a lady of aristocratic birth, by name Honesta, whom he marries, and becomes so infatuated with her that she could make him in proverbial phrase 'jump over a straw.' She leads him a wretched life, spending vast sums, indulging in every extravagance and insolence; yet never satisfied, and so savage is her temper that she can never keep a servant more than three days. The very Demons who accompanied Roderigo in the form of footmen fly in haste to their native sphere before her withering tongue. Having exhausted his fortune, Roderigo to gratify her whims embarks in vast financial speculations: fails, and is obliged to rush off in disguise, pursued by exasperated enemies. He takes refuge in the yard of a peasant, one Matteo, who in consideration of a promised reward successfully conceals him. When the pursuers have departed, Roderigo emerging, reveals his true nature to Matteo, and informs him that in revenge upon the sex he intends to resume his spiritual existence and to enter into and plague women. But Matteo, by curing those possessed can earn a large fortune, since the moment he appears, Roderigo, in gratitude, will go out. Immediately afterwards, the daughter of a great nobleman is seized with convulsions and fits, and all those symptoms which are well-known to indicate demoniacal possession. Doctors attempt a cure in vain: but Matteo, hearing of a reward of 500 ducats, approaches the lady, and whispers in her ear, 'Roderigo come forth' and instantly she is well. In the same way he cures the daughter of the King of Naples, getting 50,000 ducats as his fee. Next, the daughter of the King of France is seized; but poor Matteo when summoned now goes in fear and trembling, reflecting that he may not always succeed, and indeed, after hearing the accustomed whisper, Roderigo accuses him of avarice, declares he will no longer be deprived of his revenge, and refuses to come out. However, the dread of execution sharpens Matteo's wits. The princess is placed on a stage, surrounded with bands of music and crowds of courtiers. 'When I throw up my hat,' says Matteo, 'Do you all shout your loudest, and play your instruments most vigorously.' He approaches the princess: 'Come out, Roderigo.' 'I will not, thou varlet,' replies the Demon, 'I will see thee neatly tucked upon the gallows first.' Whereupon Matteo casts his hat in the air, horns and trumpets blow, drums beat, and shoutings resound. 'Goodness,' exclaims the poor Demon, trembling, 'What is all this noise about?' 'Your wife is coming,' says Matteo, and in an instant away flies Roderigo, glad to hide himself in Hades from that awful vixen! This merry tale is precisely opposed to the spirit of the eulogium upon *The Wife* so eloquently pronounced by Washington Irving, and which that cunning writer placed very near the beginning of his *Sketch-Book* in order to secure the suffrages of the sex, and induce them to lend it their powerful recommendation. A commentator naively observes that Machiavelli was himself married.

Jefferies and Astronomy

Rebecca Welshman

In April 2010 I found two previously unknown letters by Jefferies, dated 1870 and 1871, in the *Astronomical Register*, a national magazine devoted to the study of astronomy. The magazine had an active correspondence section and sought to encourage amateur astronomers. I was first led to the letters by the discovery of a later letter, dated 1922, in another magazine titled *The Observatory* by the renowned astronomer William Frederick Denning, who had found one of the Jefferies letters while looking through old copies of the *Astronomical Register*. *The Observatory* was founded at the world-famous Royal Observatory at Greenwich by William Christie, who became Astronomer Royal. It is one of the most important astronomical journals, and publishes the proceedings of the Royal Astronomical Society.

The Bristol-based Denning, described as ‘a tireless investigator of the heavens’¹ was known for his discovery of four comets from 1881-1894. He was the Director of the British Astronomical Association’s Comet Section, then later became Director of the Meteor section, and was known to encourage amateur astronomers. In the letter, dated October 1922, he cites his discovery of Jefferies’ sighting of a meteor in 1871, referring to Jefferies as ‘the well-known writer on natural history subjects.’



W. F. Denning at Eggerton Road, Bristol, circa 1928

¹ Martin Beech, ‘Denning on Comets, nebulae and novae’ WGN, *The Journal of the International Meteor Organisation*, 26(6), 1998, pp. 268-272.

² Image reproduced from <http://uregina.ca/~astro/DEN/Denning.html>.

In the same year Denning remarked in the journal *Nature* that ‘it is remarkable that English astronomers appear hitherto to have taken little interest in cometary work, and that very few comets have been discovered from this country. ... there are a great number of telescopic observers in the United Kingdom who have the means and the time at their disposal to accomplish valuable work in this department if they would only engage in it in an earnest manner.’ His discovery of Jefferies’ interest in astronomy prompted him to publish the following article in *The Observatory*, titled ‘Richard Jefferies’ Meteor’, which not only reproduces Jefferies’ letter but includes some detailed research by Denning into the position and flight of the meteor:

Richard Jefferies’ Meteor

In looking through some old astronomical books I met with an interesting description of a Fireball by the late Richard Jefferies, the well-known writer on natural history subjects. The letter appears in the *Astronomical Register* for 1871 March, page 65, and refers to an observation made on 1871 Feb. 13, 9.10 P.M. The reference to the meteor is as follows:-

A Brilliant Meteor

Sir, -

Yesterday evening (Feb.13, 1871), about ten minutes past nine, while walking along a road, I was suddenly startled by a flash of pale-coloured violet light, so intense and vivid that the trees, hedges, a wall, and the very ruts in the road were distinctly visible for half a mile in front. Thinking it was lightning, I expected that the next moment I should be plunged in darkness, and to my surprise the light continued and grew even more vivid.

It cast my shadow in front; and in wonder, half expecting to see a sun, I turned, and as I turned could see fields and hedges on my right for nearly a mile, and a wood at the end as plainly as in daylight. Then, looking up, I saw a meteor darting towards the west. It disappeared almost the moment I saw it, but the trail remained for nearly two minutes. It was at first nearly straight, but gradually curled up at the ends, grew broader in the middle, and finally seemed to become so diffused in the atmosphere as to disappear. It appeared to be about two degrees to the west of the lower part of Orion.

I have seen almost all astronomical and meteorological phenomena, but never observed so intense a light emitted by a meteor. It somewhat resembled the effect produced by the coloured rockets at the Crystal Palace *fetes*. I fancied I heard a hissing noise whilst the light continued, but this I consider a delusion, having frequently believed I heard crackling sounds during an aurora, which sound science disbelieves. I put the phenomena down to what I may, perhaps, call homology of the senses, for I notice, if I touch brass and see it, I feel a disagreeable taste in my mouth. Why not, then, upon seeing particular kinds of light, should I not hear, or fancy I hear, sounds? – people sometimes imagine their names are called when no one speaks, as if there were memory of the ear. Now a quick flashing light carries the idea of crackling; the quick passage of a body that of hissing, as a bullet – thus, may not the senses be excited one by the other?

RICHARD JEFFERIES.
Coate, Swindon, Wilts.

The fireball was also seen from Rugby, Exeter, Torquay, Portsmouth, Callington (Cornwall), and other places, and I also observed it from Bristol ... the meteor was quite as bright as a full moon, and left a luminous streak distinctly visible to the eye for ten minutes.

Some details of the meteor are published in the B.A. report for 1871, page 33, where it is stated that that Mr. W.H. Wood had approximately determined the real path, and placed the radiant near a Hydrae, the height of the object was from 55 miles to 35 miles, and it traversed a path of about 80 miles over the English Channel.

These were only approximate observations from insufficient data. I would prefer to put the radiant at 198+19 on the E.N.E horizon, and to give the meteor a much longer flight nearly parallel with the earth's surface, and directed from E.N.E to W.S.W. The radiant supposed to be near a Hydrae is disproved by an observation from Portsmouth, where the observer, Mr. James Blake, describes the meteor as first seen in N.E. and disappearing in the S.W.

W.F. DENNING.

Unknown to Denning, there was an earlier letter by Jefferies in the *Astronomical Register*, dated April 1870, which accounted his experience of seeing spots on the sun.

SPOTS ON THE SUN

Sir, - I was standing in the garden about a quarter past 6 on Sunday evening (April 3), when I chanced to look at the sunset, and immediately saw a large black spot on the sun's disc. It reminded me at once of a sun spot, but I had never heard of spots being visible to the naked eye, and I endeavoured to ascertain by observation the nature of the spot I could see. I watched it for full half-an-hour, during which time several small clouds drifted across the sun's disc from north to south apparently, and in their passage dimmed the spot and once completely obscured it; but they had no sooner passed over the than the spot was again plainly visible, - a black spot on the red disc of the sun. The sun was now sinking fast, but the spot sank with it, which circumstance seemed conclusive in my mind as to its being a sun spot. At length the spot was obscured by the thick mist into which the sun sank [...] Subsequently I obtained a telescope, which set the question at rest at once, by revealing a large spot and several smaller ones. Not remembering any parallel instance of seeing a sun spot with the naked eye, I venture to communicate my observation, and to append a rough diagram of the apparent position of the spot when I first saw it on Sunday.

I remain, yours respectfully,

Coate, near Swindon,

RICHARD JEFFRIES,³

April 6, 1870.

*Editor, Wilts and Gloucester Standard.*⁴

[At the beginning of the month of April, spots on the sun were visible easily without optical assistance. Our correspondent's diagram represents the spot on the upper part of the sun's disc to the left hand - ED.]

³ The signature is incorrectly printed as 'Jeffries'.

⁴ Jefferies signs himself 'Editor of the Wiltshire and Gloucester Standard.' While it is known that Jefferies was chief reporter for the paper, it seems his role might have at one time have also been Editor.

This letter describes, quite factually, Jefferies' experience of the sun spots. However, a later piece of work, taken from manuscript, accounts the same experience in a very different way. This piece was printed in the *RJS Journal* no.6 (1997, p.13), under the title 'Sun Spots', and is one of the only records of Jefferies' early cosmic consciousness – 13 years before *The Story of my Heart* was published. In this later account Jefferies distinguishes between the 'youthful times' when he first saw the sun-spot, which with the aid of the letter to the *Astronomical Register* we can now date to 1870, when he was 21, and his more mature outlook, which had lost some of the earlier vibrancy and mystery:

There was a great sun-spot at that time and every afternoon as the sun sank I used to sit facing the west under the russet apple tree waiting till the thin vapour on the horizon absorbed the glow of light so that I could see it. The great black speck with a smaller one near it became distinct upon the broad red disk, and I watched it till the sun went down ...To me it was a wonderful and never-wearying spectacle, evening after evening as I watched it under the low boughs of the russet apple, the great fiery disk slowly dropping beyond the brook and the meadow, beyond the elms on the rise, beyond the distant hills. The green leaves over and the grass under the quiet rush of the brook, the evening song of the birds, the hushing hum of the bees at the hives set just there, I forgot all but these and the sun – by the spot I could touch out almost to it.

Yet then I thought little of it, I did not value it, it was only one of the things I should see – hundreds more wonderful as life went on. It has not been so. I have never seen anything more wonderful than the things I saw then; never felt or thought like I used to in those youthful times. Nothing then was of any value; now if I could only get back those moments they would be to me more precious than gold.⁵

⁵ The sunspot experience is also accounted in a short poem, which Looker printed in *Chronicles of the Hedges* under the title 'Recapitulation.'

What Counts as Regional Writing?

Eric Jones

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Had Gilbert White taken the Oriel College living in Gloucestershire which was suggested to him, we might have had *The Natural History of Cromhall* instead of *The Natural History of Selborne*. How that may have looked is hinted at in J. L. Knapp's anonymous *Journal of a Naturalist*, which was written only a generation later at Alveston, four miles from Cromhall. The question is: do books like these come under the banner of 'regional writing'?

Region, some sardonic fellow remarked, is a metaphysical concept used by geographers. It is certainly an elastic one, though 'fractal' might be a more up-to-date term, with the small scale and local nested inside successively larger units, like Russian dolls. Accordingly, even the smallest unit may be claimed as regional writing, down to an individual house, as in George Ordish's, *The Living House*, or conceivably even a single garden, like his *The Living Garden* – examples which, though synthetic, tell us much about the past of Kent.

Geographers have continually tried to define regions but none seems to have come up with an operational definition. Their proposals are too indistinct. If identifying the region is such a forlorn exercise, how then may regional writing be defined? My own view is that if it is topographical, it may as well be called 'regional'. Nevertheless, for writing to go beyond this and be taken as literature it must fall into the (admittedly subjective) category of lyrical realism. Here, as elsewhere, beauty is in the eye of the beholder. The writing needs to offer portraits rather than photographs, and convey what geographers used to call the spirit or personality of the region. Whether by intention or not, the author has to conjure up the genius loci in the mind of someone who has not yet visited the district being described. Thomas Hardy had it right: his Casterbridge was 'a place more Dorchester than Dorchester itself'. The same might be said of other places transmuted in the very writing – John Moore's Elmbury (Tewkesbury), for example.

Lists of regional writings are hard to compile, at least if one is trying to assemble the full set of works about a single district. Tourist agencies and, occasionally, local councils proudly boast a bankable author or two, besides which there are several atlases of literary Britain, and guides to the literature of individual counties. In their eagerness to celebrate authors who already have brand recognition, these sources usually miss the lesser gems, particularly essays which capture some aspect of the regional essence but are scattered in fugitive magazines or unlikely collections.

The term 'aspect' raises a hydra-headed problem: how far is writing about special interests to be included in the genre? Works on blood sports (whatever one's personal views on the matter), farming, geology, natural history, travel guides and walking often contain accounts of their settings. Essays like these

may be transient, superficial or too didactic, but short thematic pieces often do seem fresher and more evocative than long works.

What are we to make, however, of the region or locality as a setting for fiction? Purportedly fictional settings are unlikely to be wholly fictitious. Somewhere will have inspired the choice, however mangled or anonymous the result is, and however mawkish the invented place-names. There is pleasurable detective work in trying to deduce the hidden locality from the clues which authors drop in their books, though this is a game spoiled by television or in films with their ludicrous, anachronistic muddles. In any case, verity is preferable to verisimilitude. Better fiction on a well-rendered stage, to be admired alongside the story, than some indecipherable Mummerset.

Regional writing is especially interesting when it tracks one of the greatest changes of the last couple of centuries: the over-running of the countryside by the town. 'Lost in Suburbia' would make a good title for another game, the bittersweet one of hunting for the remains of literary landscapes. While we are making plans to visit the places our authors wrote about, developers are planning to bury them. Entertaining though it may be, at least in a masochistic way, to disinter the once-rustic topography since concealed by modern bricks-and-mortar, the insensitivity of the destruction is astonishing. One might expect any businessman or local authority to try to capitalise on literary associations. But no, in planning law literary landscapes lack any status (lawyers probably call it 'locus').

This is a special sorrow for those of us in the Richard Jefferies Society, since Jefferies' home, Coate Farmhouse, in Swindon (now a museum) and its surroundings are due to be strangled by a tight ring of houses. Here the author's top-notch prose relates precisely to fields, brooks, trees and sarsen stones that may still be seen. Jefferies' Coate is decidedly more Coate than Coate itself. This was his authorial magic. What inspired him is just about visible – for the moment. In his case the setting really does enhance the appeal of the writing.

It is remarkable how so-called regional writing attaches to authors rather than places. Among societies that belong to the Alliance of Literary Societies only a couple deal with the literature of a locality or county rather than the celebration of some favourite author.

Unlike painters, authors (except perhaps poets) tend not to cluster. They work in isolation and do not own studios where would-be customers may gaze on work in progress: what would there be to see beyond a desk and some pens, or the winking monitor of a personal computer? If a work transcends its arena and is held to have become timeless literature – the common property of humanity – all well and good, but little may be left of its regional quality. Locality is reduced to the grin of a Cheshire Cat. In my opinion, an author cannot use the landscape which nurtured the work merely as a stage set and be thought a genuinely regional writer. Place must be distilled, not expelled, or the writing ceases to be truly regional.

Bibliographical Discoveries: Jefferies Imitators

Rebecca Welshman

The Jefferies Canon currently includes many essays with little evidence of Jefferies' authorship other than similarities in style and subject with other confirmed works. Several of these pieces were reprinted by Samuel Looker in the 1940s in his collections, *Field and Farm* and *Chronicles of the Hedges*. George Miller and Hugoe Matthews were the first to question these attributions in the *Bibliographical Study* in 1993, and since then W.J. Keith has written a revised *Canon* of articles attributed to Jefferies (1995) citing evidence for and against Jefferies' authorship of each piece (74 in total).

Chronicles of the Hedges includes fragments of manuscript which Looker transcribed, as well as articles which appeared in the *St James's Gazette* and the *Livestock Journal*. After researching these articles I can confirm that several of them are not by Jefferies, but belonged to another naturalist writing in a very similar style on similar subjects, called John Watson. Based in Kendal, and known during the late 1880s and 1890s as a writer on rural subjects, particularly birds, Watson wrote a series titled 'The Birds of Yorkshire' for the *Leeds Mercury* in 1884 and a series titled 'Country Life' in the *Manchester Times* under the pseudonym 'Ranger'. After Jefferies' death Watson published yearly titles on rural subjects in the style of *The Gamekeeper at Home* and *The Amateur Poacher*. His style is similar to Jefferies but lacks his depth and poignancy. Watson appears to have begun publishing in the style of Jefferies in 1884 and developed a more individual style over the next 10 years, contributing to the *Cornhill*, *National Review*, *Macmillan's* and *The Nineteenth Century*.

Watson was recognised as most closely assuming the place of Jefferies after 1887. A reviewer of Watson's *Nature and Woodcraft* in the *Academy* says of Watson that 'some portion of the mantle of Jefferies has fallen upon his shoulders.' The reviewer recognises that Watson 'does not possess, indeed, that eye for minuteness in describing nature which belonged to his master', but notes that, 'boundless enthusiasm for the lower animals, a happy knack of observing minor traits, and literary skill in describing them are marked characteristics of both authors.'⁶

⁶ The *Academy*, 946 (1890: June 21), p.423.

Of items attributed to Jefferies – some of which have already been highlighted as being unsupported by full documentary evidence by Hugoe Matthews in the *Index* (2008) – the following are by Watson. These include:

- ❖ ‘Nightingales’ (SJM 10th April 1886), collected in *Chronicles of the Hedges*, p.88⁷
- ❖ ‘Conforming to Environment’ (SJM 24 June 1886)
- ❖ ‘The Protection of Nature’ (*Field and Farm*, p.68)⁸
- ❖ ‘Bird Notes in June’ (*FF*, p.69)
- ❖ ‘The Ditch and the Pool’ (*CH*, pp.148-9)
- ❖ ‘Notes A-Field’ (SJM, July 28th 1885)
- ❖ ‘In Summer Fields’ (SJM 7th June 1886), published in the *Richard Jefferies Society Journal*, 11: 3-4 (2002)
- ❖ ‘The Gamekeeper’s Larder’ (*St. James’s Gazette*⁹ and *Manchester Guardian*, July 1886). (A cutting of this article from the paper was found in the late 1990s, pasted into an early copy of Jefferies’ *The Gamekeeper at Home*, and was attributed to Jefferies on the basis of style and subject matter). Published in the *Richard Jefferies Society Journal* 7: 4-6 (1998)

Sections of these papers appear in John Watson’s collected periodical contributions to the *Leeds Mercury*, *Manchester Times*, *Pall Mall Gazette*, and *SJM*, and were collected in books called *Sylvan Folk* (1889), *Confessions of a Poacher* (1890), *Poachers and Poaching* (1891), *Woodlanders and Field Folk*, *Nature and Woodcraft*, and other yearly titles. The similarities more readily came to light because Watson used and reused sections of his work in his various publications. A review of *Poachers and Poaching* in August 1891 in *Murray’s Magazine* notes that the author frequently repeated himself:

Mr. Watson is a close observer of nature, and we are glad that he has preserved the results of some of his observations in the present volume, instead of leaving them to go the unhonoured way of the majority of magazine articles. But it might be as well, perhaps, so to revise these reprinted papers as to prevent the recurrence of passages almost precisely the same, as, for instance, on pages 29 and 189, and again on pages 7 and 270. Mr Watson has evidently made a close study of the habits and methods of poachers, and his work would form an excellent “Gamekeeper’s Manual.” Yet its title scarcely does it justice, for it is instinct with the love of the fields and woods, and all true lovers of nature will be grateful to him for letting them share in his pleasures.

⁷ *Chronicles of the Hedges* will hereafter be cited as *CH*.

⁸ *Field and Farm* will hereafter be cited as *FF*.

⁹ Hereafter cited as *SJM*.

'Nightingales' (SJG and CH)

A section of 'Nightingales', which appears in the *SJG* on 19th April 1886, and in *CH* (pp.81-91), occurs with some paragraphs omitted in a column titled 'Birds and Beasts' in the *Newcastle Courant* in 1892. In the first paragraph the text is reproduced, beginning with 'In "the good old days of birdcatching" it was child's play to snare them' and ending with 'for the most part are imports from Germany.' The section about Dr. Johnson is abridged, and is followed by the full reproduction of the paragraph beginning 'Sir John Sinclair tried to overcome', concluding with 'the young birds all flew away, and they never returned.'¹⁰

The article is unsigned but it is obviously rehashed from its original appearance in the *SJG* six years before. It is noted to be 'specially contributed', from an anonymous contemporary newspaper. The author could be Watson, who by this time had established a name for himself as an author on natural history, particularly birds. However, Watson's authorship of this piece cannot be confirmed as I have not yet found the text in his collected work. The section in *CH* under the same title, Looker dates as 1886. Looker does not say that this is from manuscript, which suggests that the piece was taken directly from the *SJG*.

'Conforming to Environment' (SJG), 'The Protection of Nature' (FF), and 'Bird Notes in June' (FF)

Phrases in 'Conforming to Environment' appear a few days earlier than its appearance in the *SJG* on June 24th 1886 in a piece by Watson (June 19th 1886) in the *Leeds Mercury* in the 'Birds of Yorkshire' series (signed 'John Watson'), and again even earlier that year in the 'Country Life' series in the *Manchester Times* on Jan 2nd 1886, which is unsigned.¹¹ The entirety of 'Conforming to Environment' appears as an article titled 'Protective Colouring in Birds' in *Chambers's Journal* on July 19th 1898. Sentences from these articles occur in Watson's book *Poachers and Poaching*. The article in *Chambers's* also contains paragraphs about the purple emperor butterfly, geraniums, and the protective colouring of birds which make up 'The Protection of Nature' in *Field and Farm*. The two pieces are identical: the article in *Chambers's* follows each point made in 'The Protection of Nature', but expands upon each to make a fuller article (2 columns in total). 'Bird Notes in June', also in *FF* (pp.68-9) is a mixture of replicated sentences and scenes from Watson's other work,

¹⁰ *Newcastle Weekly Courant*, April 2nd, 1892.

¹¹ Large sections of the 'Country Life' series appear in Watson's collections, identifying him as the author.

including 'In Summer Fields', 'Conforming to Environment' and 'Notes A-Field', particularly the chaffinch whose nest is 'almost impossible to detect' because of its resemblance to the trunk against which it is placed (an observation also repeated in 'The Protection of Nature'). Although Jefferies makes occasional references to Darwin's work he did not embrace the theory of evolution, believing that it was an over simplification of the idea of life and that it left too much unexplained. 'Conforming to Environment' clearly endorses the view that birds and insects assume protective camouflage and adapt to their environment, a theme which ran throughout the work of John Watson.

'The Ditch and the Pool' (CH) and 'Notes-A-Field' (SJG)

The text of 'The Ditch and the Pool' appears in the *SJG* as part of another (uncollected) Looker attribution titled 'Notes A-Field'. The latter piece is later included in entirety, under the same title ('Notes A-Field'), in Watson's *Sylvan Folk* (1889). The text of 'The Ditch and the Pool' appears in entirety as part of a longer article titled 'A Mountain Tarn' in the 'Country Life' series in the *Manchester Times* April 17th 1886, by Watson.

'The Gamekeeper's Larder', *Manchester Guardian* and *Richard Jefferies Society Journal* 7: 4-6

This item appeared in several newspapers, including the *Manchester Guardian* (July 5th), the *Aberdeen Weekly Journal*, (July 13th), and the *Penny Illustrated Paper* (July 10th). The reprint in the *Aberdeen Weekly* notes the source to be the *St. James's Gazette*. In the *Canon*, W.J. Keith expresses doubts about several of the items under discussion, but not 'The Gamekeeper's Larder.' Parts of 'The Gamekeeper's Larder' are reprinted in an article in the *Hampshire Telegraph* on Nov 19th 1887, p.12 (two months after Jefferies' death), titled 'Winged Poachers'. The article is said to be contributed by 'a natural history correspondent of the *St. James's Gazette*', and reproduces scenes of a keeper shooting a hawk: 'there was a puff of white smoke and a cloud of feathers and then the marauder dropped with a dead thud to the sward.' The section from 'The Gamekeeper's Larder' about the call of a kestrel sounding like 'kee kee keelie' and the image of the bird on a 'silken thread' is also used in an article called 'Bird and Beast Poachers' in the *Cornhill Magazine* in 1891. 'The Gamekeeper's Larder' matches parts of the text and the sentiment of 'Nature's Poachers' (*PMG*, Sept. 17th 1886) which is Jefferies-esque in style, but which later occurs in full in Watson's book titled *A Year in the Fields* published in 1888. 'Nature's Poachers' is a companion piece to

'Nature's Night Sounds' published in the *PMG* Oct. 8th 1886, which contains phrases such as 'my old angler friend calls this bird the fisherman's nightingale' (see 'Notes A-Field'), and 'gaunt heron' which frequently appear in Watson's work. 'The Gamekeeper's Larder' contains rather unimaginative phrases which are not characteristically Jefferies, such as 'little falcon', 'audacious magpies', 'pleasant cry', and 'wondrously adapted feet.' Watson wrote about the adaptation of animals and birds to their environment and frequently alludes to the notion of the survival of the fittest. The author repeats 'audacious magpies', even though the article is short. The slaughter of the kestrel by the keeper seems incongruous with Jefferies' other work at this time and would seem to hark back to the time of *The Gamekeeper at Home*, *Wild Life in a Southern County*, and *The Amateur Poacher*. It is also worth noting that in his description of a kestrel in 'Nature Near Brighton' (1883) in *The Standard* Jefferies does not particularly admire the hovering of the bird (as does the author of 'The Gamekeeper's Larder') but is more interested in its flight. Jefferies says: 'the power of hovering is not as great as that of soaring', which is echoed in the last sentence of 'The Hovering of the Kestrel' in which he writes 'hovering is very interesting; but not nearly so mysterious as at least one other power possessed by birds' (p.180). By 1886 his admiration of beauty and form, and his desire to work out the mechanics of life itself, seem to have eclipsed his appetite for detailing the practical.

After writing up this argument in support of Watson's authorship of the article I found the entirety of 'The Gamekeeper's Larder' in Watson's collection of essays, *Nature and Woodcraft*, with one sentence omitted, under the title 'The Gamekeeper's Golgotha'. The discovery also confirms Watson as the author of several further pieces in the *PMG*, which closely resemble Jefferies in style and sentiment.

One problem with these discoveries is that what Looker calls transcriptions from Jefferies' manuscripts in *FF*, appear in Watson's work. These include 'The Protection of Nature' and 'Bird Notes in June', which Looker says in a footnote were 'quickly written pencil notes ... most difficult to read.' It is possible that Looker might have been sold some of Watson's manuscript and mistaken it for Jefferies – he does mention that it is in pencil and is illegible – or that Jefferies wrote out some passages of Watson's from the *SJG* in 1885/6 and Looker transcribed them, which seems unlikely. It also seems unlikely that Watson could have copied Jefferies because many of the similarities I've found between the suspicious items attributed to Jefferies and the work of Watson, including key phrases, are first published by Watson in his serials in the *Leeds Mercury* and

Manchester Times between 1884-1886, before they appeared in the *SJG*, and are reused in other articles and books over a long period of time, well after Jefferies' death. In the 'Country Life' series in the *Manchester Times*, Watson acknowledges his debt to Jefferies as his precursor. He footnotes scenes which he says resemble similar events in Jefferies' country books, but he says they are events which he also experienced and he writes of them 'in his own words.'

Miller and Matthews (1993) state that Looker sought to avoid including anything that might present Jefferies in a bad light. One of Looker's ambitions was to get people reading Jefferies again, and he sought to produce as much 'new' Jefferies work as possible. As this would have been quite a solitary task, it is possible to see how mistakes could have been made. However, having been to the British Library and found the majority of the manuscripts of the short extracts in *Field and Farm* and *Chronicles of the Hedges*, which are clearly identifiable as Jefferies, the two manuscripts for the texts in *Field and Farm*, which are Watson's, have not yet come to light.

I am concerned that the mistakenly attributed items have been republished as Jefferies, not only by Looker in the 1940s but also in the *Richard Jefferies Society Journal*, as recently as 2002. This means that people have been unwittingly quoting passages which are not by Jefferies – e.g.: Brian Morris' *Richard Jefferies and the Ecological Vision*, published 2006, which cites 'The Gamekeeper's Larder'. In terms of scholarship it is worrying to think that Jefferies is being misquoted and, equally, that the lesser-known work of John Watson is not being acknowledged.

As part of my ongoing investigation I have identified textual similarities between several other unproven Jefferies attributions and the work of other writers at the time, as well as with anonymous articles published after Jefferies' death. For example, several of the papers on partridges which appear in Looker's lists of attributions bear strong textual resemblances to articles by Thomas Edward Kebbel, who wrote under the name 'T.E. Kebbel' or 'T.E.K.' Kebbel was born in 1827 and lived until 1917. A journalist and author, and close friend of Disraeli, Kebbel published a book titled *The Agricultural Labourer* in November 1870, which constituted papers published in the *Cornhill* and the *Pall Mall Gazette*, predating Jefferies' letters to the *Times* on the same subject. Kebbel also published widely on country subjects in periodicals which Jefferies contributed to, and there are strong similarities between Kebbel's work and articles which appear in the *SJG*.

The number of articles on rural subjects in the *SJG* which are

unsigned suggests that the editor, Frederick Greenwood, who was a friend of Jefferies, was encouraging submissions from authors such as Watson and Keibel, in a similar style and on similar subjects as Jefferies, and leaving them unsigned. As this new vein of popular writing emerged, perhaps initially, but not exclusively, popularised by Jefferies in his serials in the *Standard* and the *Pall Mall Gazette* from 1878-1880, it seemed to become common practice to leave items ambiguously unsigned. However, in Jefferies' case, many of his articles after 1882 were signed, which makes the unsigned attributions after this date more problematic.

In his later years, and particularly after his death, it came to national attention that there had been a sudden rise in the number of Jefferies imitators. A reviewer of *By Roadside and River* by H. Mead Briggs, in *Knowledge* (March 1st, 1898), states that 'Richard Jefferies has had of late many imitators. For some years past the public has been liberally supplied with a class of book of which *By Roadside and River* is an example.' The following year, in a review of another countryside book in the *Standard*, the author traces the emergence of the natural history trend: 'To whosoever lot it shall fall to write the history of English literature in the nineteenth century, one of the distinctive features in it which he will be called upon to notice is the development of the taste for natural history characteristic of the last thirty years.' The article goes on to trace the emergence of the trend to the time of the lyric poets and Washington Irving, through to Isaac Walton and Gilbert White – the only well-known writers of the genre in the mid-nineteenth century – to Walter Scott, Frank Buckland, and to Jefferies. 'Gradually,' says the author, 'a school has been formed, and works in which picturesque accounts of shooting and fishing are combined with histories of local flora and fauna now issue from the Press in considerable numbers every year.'¹²

The process of identifying the authorship of items attributed to Jefferies continues as more books and periodicals are digitalised. The discovery of Watson's authorship of pieces which have been reprinted as Jefferies, and the number of other imitators, illustrates the competitive nature of the market that Jefferies helped to create. Yet perhaps more importantly it shows the impact Jefferies had on his reading public, for his imitators were, foremost, admirers, seeking to enjoy and express the wonders of the natural world in a way that they had learned from Jefferies.

¹² The *Standard*, October 24, 1892, p. 6.

His First Biographer: a Profile of Sir Walter Besant

Andrew Rossabi

A few yards west of Waterloo Bridge the wall of Victoria Embankment bears a memorial to Sir Walter Besant, first biographer of Richard Jefferies, in the form of a bronze plaque about four feet high by two-and-a-half feet wide, pictured below. The top half consists of a portrait bust in high relief, signed [Sir] Geo. Frampton 1902. The lower bears the legend:



SIR WALTER BESANT
NOVELIST
HISTORIAN OF LONDON
SECRETARY OF THE PALESTINE EXPLORATION FUND
ORIGINATOR OF THE PEOPLE'S PALACE
AND
FOUNDER OF THE SOCIETY OF AUTHORS
THIS MONUMENT IS ERECTED
BY
HIS GRATEFUL BRETHREN IN LITERATURE
BORN 14TH AUGUST 1836 = DIED 9TH JUNE 1901
26

The plaque is shaded by plane trees, about whose planting Jefferies complained in 'Trees About Town'.¹ The wording succinctly summarises the main achievements of Besant's career, which, in typically Victorian fashion, spilled beyond the bounds of literature into the realm of philanthropy. In short, Besant was a reformer, crusader, do-gooder, supporter of a host of worthy causes.² Richard Jefferies was one such, and Besant wrote *The Eulogy*³ not only as a tribute to an author he greatly admired but also to help raise money for his widow, who had been left destitute by his premature death. Besant generously donated the royalties from the book to Mrs. Jefferies, and as the work went through four editions the sum was appreciably more than the £60 he originally anticipated.⁴ On 14 July 1888 he had written to her:

Whatever the book brings in, take it as my tribute to a writer whom I have loved for ten years with an increasing admiration.⁵

In *The Eulogy* Besant related that he had first discovered Jefferies' work in 'about the year 1876':

I remember the delight with which I drank, as a bright and refreshing draught from a clear spring-head, the story of the country life as set forth by him, this writer, the like of whom I had never before read. Why, we must have been blind all our lives; here were the most wonderful things possible going on under our very noses, but we saw them not.⁶

He explained how he had regular business dealings with the printer Robert Billing, husband of Jefferies' sister Sarah, and formed the habit of talking with him about Jefferies as soon as their business was concluded:

Henceforward, therefore, week by week, I followed the fortunes of this man, and read not only his books and his papers, but learned his personal history, and heard what he was doing, and watched him curiously, unknown and unsuspected by himself.⁷

Besant says Jefferies was a proud and reserved man, and his own people knew little about his intentions or projects, still less about 'the terrible poverty of his later days'⁸. That he never met Jefferies was to him a source of 'a deep and abiding sorrow' because he was never able to tell him 'face to face' how much he admired and valued his work:

with what joy I received it, with what eagerness I expected it, what splendid qualities I found in it, what instruction and elevation of soul I

derived from it.⁹

Nevertheless in his own way he may have learned

to know him more intimately even than some of those who rejoiced in being called his friends.¹⁰

It was probably Besant's acquaintance with Jefferies' brother-in-law Robert Billing that brought him to the attention of Mrs. Jefferies and prompted her to ask him to write a preface in the form of a brief life to the collection of her late husband's last essays which she was preparing for Longmans, Green & Co and which was published under the title *Field and Hedgerow* in January 1889.¹¹ That Besant agreed was something of a coup: he was a highly successful author, widely respected as novelist, historian, critic and scholar, and extremely well connected (e.g. with the Poet Laureate, Lord Tennyson) as a result of his work for the Society of Authors, which he had been instrumental in founding a few years earlier.

The volume of essays expanded in length and at some point Mrs. Jefferies must have asked Besant instead of the preface to write a biography proper, promising him her full cooperation in terms of access to her husband's letters and note-books. On 20 September 1887 she wrote to Besant from J.W. North's home in Taunton, where she had moved from Goring by Sea:

It is with some diffidence I write to you on this subject. I have heard that you might be induced to write a short life of my husband. I should be so glad to hear from you that there is a foundation for this and that you will undertake it.¹²

Besant wrote the book quickly (one rumour said in a fortnight) — much consisted of quotation of Jefferies' writings or letters or extracts from his note-books — but it served its purpose. *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies* was published in September 1888 by Besant's publisher Chatto and Windus, who had previously published Jefferies' essay collections *Nature Near London* (1883), *The Life of the Fields* (1884), and *The Open Air* (1885).¹³ In many ways it is an unsatisfactory work. In it Besant had confessed his insensitivity to nature¹⁴, hardly the best qualification for a biographer of Jefferies, one would have thought; and *The Eulogy* is marked throughout, but particularly in the early chapters, by a querulous and patronising tone. Many readers will agree with Edward Thomas, who said Besant's book was 'kindly, but unsympathetic and incomplete'¹⁵. In private Thomas was even harsher

in his criticism. In a letter to his friend Gordon Bottomley from Minsmere, where he had gone to compose his own, much fuller, life of Jefferies, he wrote:

I simply ignore Besant, tho my chances of controverting him with security, of pointing out his indolence his incompetence his incompleteness & his inaccuracy are many; not to speak of his pervasive vulgarity.¹⁶

This said, Besant's biography established the basic trajectory of Jefferies' life and career in firm outline. It was clearly, briskly, and vigorously written, and nothing if not readable. Above all, it contained much valuable documentation: Besant cited letters and notebooks that are no longer extant. And as an act of charity the work was exemplary.¹⁷



By coincidence Walter Besant was born on the day of Jefferies' death, 14 August, in 1836 at Portsea, son of a Portsmouth wine merchant. His father's small library of English classics, including Scott and Dickens, introduced him to literature, and Besant states that his boyhood leisure hours were chiefly spent 'coiled up in a corner, nose in book'.¹⁸ He gave early signs of a charitable bent by making presents of tobacco to the convicts working on Portsea harbour. He had a peripatetic education at the hands of tutors and private schools before becoming a boarder at Stockwell Grammar School, which he left in 1854 as captain laden with prizes. Short-sightedness prevented his enjoying sport and he would spend his half-holidays exploring the City of London. He thus developed a lifelong love of the city and an interest in its history and literary, particularly Dickensian, associations:

Once I found myself in Goswell Street, and looked about for Mrs. Bardell, just as beside the Monument I looked about for the residence of Mrs. Todgers, or the square in which Tim Linkinwater lived.¹⁹

Stockwell Grammar was affiliated with King's College, London, where Besant spent three unhappy but formative terms, winning prizes in classics, maths and divinity, before matriculating at Christ's College, Cambridge, in 1856. Christ's was then a small college with under 100 students. The most remarkable man in Besant's time was the poet and scholar Charles Stuart Calverley, who became one of his best friends. Besant won the gold medal for English Essay, equal with Calverley, and first prize in an examination set by Calverley in the study of *Pickwick Papers*. He later said that no achievement at Christ's gave

him greater pleasure. He differed from Jefferies in being a passionate admirer of Dickens, who would be a major influence on his fiction, usually written 'with a purpose'. A university education was another difference. Fruitless to speculate whether Jefferies would have been the same writer had he gone to Oxbridge — one suspects that mixing in such a society might well have taken the edge off his sensibility, and that his writing would have lost the ease, naturalness, and lack of self-consciousness that are among its chief charms. Thomas well noted the difference between Gilbert White and Jefferies: 'Even White's utmost simplicity is that of a scholar, and smells of Oriel as much as of Selborne,'²⁰ whereas *The Gamekeeper at Home* was 'perhaps the first thoroughly rustic book in English, by a countryman and about the country, with no alien savours whatever'.²¹

Besant read maths and graduated 18th Wrangler in 1859. To friends who had expected better he replied that Cambridge had broadened his mind, improved his general knowledge and culture, and given him standards and models. It was 'a school in manners'.²²

After Cambridge Besant became a schoolmaster, teaching maths at Leamington College, intending to take holy orders and become chaplain there. In 1860 he went on a walking tour in the Tyrol with Calverley and two other friends. Abandoning thoughts of ordination he accepted the senior professorship at the Royal College of Mauritius, where he stayed six-and-a-half years, rid himself of his university and ecclesiastical prejudices, and became more human. All the while he was writing, mostly essays. He says he was not in the least precocious and went to great efforts to discipline his pen, which at first was rambling and discursive:

No-one would believe the trouble I had in making the pen a servant instead of a master: in other words, in forcing the brain to concentration.²³

That Besant was a painstaking writer is confirmed by his friend and colleague S. Squire Sprigge who noted his rigorous habits of emendation which 'resulted in a page that was extremely easy to read, and the pains which it might have cost to write were never really appreciated'.²⁴

Suffering boredom and ill-health, Besant returned to England in 1867, aged 31. He settled in London, determined to pursue a literary career but not to become a publisher's hack. In Mauritius he had used his free time to study French literature and his first published book *Early French Poetry* (1868) was a *succès d'estime*. It was followed by *The French Humorists from the Twelfth to the Nineteenth Century* (1873)

and by studies of *Montaigne* (1875) and *Rabelais* (1879), whom Besant helped popularise in England. In 1879 he formed a Rabelais club for the discussion of his work.

In June 1868 Besant became secretary of the Palestine Exploration Fund, a society founded for the systematic and scientific exploration of that land. He held the office for 18 years until 1886, and 'devoted his pen to the interests of the fund with characteristic energy'²⁵. His secretary's salary of £200 per annum (later raised to £300) enabled Besant to realize his dream of a literary life with financial security. His work allowed him plenty of free time in which to write. Through it he came into contact with E.H. Palmer, Professor of Arabic at Cambridge, with whom he wrote *Jerusalem: the City of Herod and Saladin* (1871), which treated the period from the siege by Titus to modern times.

Besant urged all literary aspirants to have a subsidiary career — schoolteaching, Civil Service clerkship, 'anything, anything, rather than dependence on the pen, and the pen alone'²⁶. Besant emphasised his own independence: he began with a specialist book, was a bachelor, and lived frugally. The great thing in literary work was 'not to be compelled to go pot-boiling'.²⁷ He wrote an article on the Marseillaise (which had been revived as the French national anthem) for the *Daily News* on the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War, shortly before Jefferies' holiday in Brussels in 1870. Another difference: Jefferies, though he later visited Paris in 1883, was disparaging of the city, which he called the plainest in Europe,²⁸ and of French literature in general (save Dumas and Hugo), whereas Besant was a confirmed Francophile. It is clear, by the way, from Chapter IX of Besant's autobiography on his first steps in a literary career that he considered Jefferies' youthful efforts to make his mark hopelessly misguided, as he had previously made plain in the early chapters of *The Eulogy*.

Besant turned novelist by accident. In 1869 an article by him on the island of Réunion appeared in the magazine *Once a Week*. It was printed without acknowledgement and contained many misprints. Besant remonstrated with the editor James Rice, whose explanation appeased him. The two men became friends. In the Christmas (1869) number of *Once a Week* Besant published a story about the last night of the fairies in this island entitled 'Titania's Farewell'. Afterwards Rice proposed that he and Besant collaborate on a novel with variations on the Prodigal Son theme, the plot of which he had already drafted. The result was *Ready Money Mortiboy*, first serialised in *Once a Week* and later (in 1872) successfully published in volume form as a three-decker. The partnership lasted ten years, and produced nine novels.

The most successful was *The Golden Butterfly* (1876), the story of an American millionaire's vulgarity, which by 1912 had sold some 300 thousand copies. In general Rice provided the plot and development, while Besant did most of the actual writing. In *By Celia's Arbour* (1878) the whole of the local part about Portsmouth was Besant's, being largely autobiographical of his boyhood. Of the joint novels Besant's favourite was *The Chaplain of the Fleet* (1879), the first of his to be set in the eighteenth century. In general, he believed 'the first and most important thing is to have a clear story with strong characters'.²⁹

In a letter to *The Times* Percy Fitzgerald described Rice and Besant's literary alliance:

They met at each other's rooms over a pipe and glass of grog, and debated the story, chapter by chapter. Rice, having read his friend's daily portion of the work, would arrive furnished with many ingenious expedients for unravelling or complicating the situation... Besant had a gift for seizing on and developing what was thus put before him.³⁰

The pair also wrote a play (*Such a Good Man*, 1879) and a life of *Sir Richard Whittington* (1879). The partnership ended in 1882 because of Rice's illness and death from cancer of the throat.

Rice had acted as Besant's unpaid literary agent. After his friend's death Besant entrusted his affairs to A.P. Watt & Son, and always expressed himself satisfied with the firm 'by whose watch and ward my interests have been so carefully guarded for eighteen years'.³¹ He was in fact one of the first writers to employ a professional literary agent.

After Rice's death Besant went solo, producing a novel annually for the next twenty years (1882-1900). He was, in his own words, endowed with 'untiring industry'³². Many of the novels, such as *Dorothy Forster* (3 vols, 1884), which treated the Jacobite rebellion of 1715 and which Besant judged his best work, were historical romances set in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Others were set in contemporary London. *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* (1882) and *Children of Gibeon* (1886) drew attention to the conditions in the East End, where Besant spent much time in research and which was *terra incognita* to most of his middle-class readers. The former became Besant's best-known novel, continuing to sell for years (250,000 copies by 1905). In it Besant imagined a 'Palace of Delights', which should offer an alternative to the joyless monotony of the lives of the East End poor. He was instrumental in turning his fiction into reality. With the help of a bequest and a large public fund the 'People's Palace' was built in the Mile End Road and opened by Queen Victoria

in 1887. The Palace had a 4000-seat hall for concerts and lectures, swimming-pool, library, recreation-room, art and technical schools, and gymnasium. It was later taken over by the Drapers' Company and run on lines different from those originally envisaged by Besant. The scheme finally developed into the East London Technical College, which in 1908 was recognised as a branch of London University. Besant's obituary in *The Times* stated:

to him must be given the credit for imagining what might be done by a combination of wealth, emotion, and common sense in furnishing the poor of the great cities with some of those rational enjoyments and opportunities of living which they cannot get for themselves.³³

All Sorts and Conditions of Men is set about Stepney, Mile End and Whitechapel, an area still poor, but lively and cheerful, with street markets and a vibrant multi-ethnic community. Mrs Bormalack runs a boarding-house in Stepney Green. The lodgers include self-styled Lord and Lady Davenant, a middle-aged American couple who have come to England in the hope of proving their claim to the title; Daniel Fagg, a 60-year-old Australian scholar who has made a Great Discovery which he is sure will rock the academic world; Harry Goslett, son of an army sergeant killed in the Indian Mutiny, who has been brought up by his father's former CO, Lord Jocelyn, as if born to the purple and educated at Eton and Oxford, and who has now decided to return to his roots *incognito* and to make the acquaintance of his kin; and Angela Kennedy, another character in disguise, alias Angela Marsden Messenger, heiress to a great brewery and one of the richest women in the land.

Angela poses as a dressmaker and sets up a revolutionary Dressmakers' Association, a self-governing co-operative which in contrast to the local sweatshops offers its young women employees short working hours, healthy meals, reading, gymnastics, and lawn tennis, and in the evenings drawing, dancing and music classes. Angela teaches her young women the manners of polite society and introduces them to culture. They prove worthy of her charge.

Harry, who soon falls in love with Angela, proposes that she build a Palace of Delights, a grand cultural-cum-recreational centre for the local residents. Angela enthusiastically embraces the idea, and the palace is duly built. She marries Harry on the day of its opening, when she reveals her true identity.

The novel is at once a celebration of the East End and a plea for social reform. Besant wished to open his readers' eyes to the poverty and harsh conditions in an area of London which was on their

doorstep, so to speak, but with which few were familiar. He spoke of 'this great neglected city of East London, of which we know nothing'.³⁴ In the chapter 'Sunday at the East End', which follows Angela and Harry as they explore the Mile End and Whitechapel Roads, Besant paints a lively picture of the temperance preachers, the cheapjacks and costermongers, the Salvation Army meeting. He calls the Whitechapel Road 'of all the roads which lead into London or out of it... the broadest and the noblest by nature.'³⁵

At several points the reader will be reminded of Jefferies and it is tantalising to speculate where Besant, even unconsciously, may have been influenced by him. For example, Angela finds the East End joyless and wishes to bring joy into its people's hearts, recalling Jefferies' desire in *The Story of My Heart* 'to give each separate personality sunshine and a flower in its own existence now'³⁶ and to do something 'to render future generations more happy'³⁷. A passage on the scourge of necessity afflicting the inhabitants of the East End recalls Jefferies as he stands outside the Royal Exchange and contemplates toiling humanity:

driven on by the push of accumulated circumstances; they cannot stay, they must go, their necks are in the slave's ring, they are beaten like seaweed against the solid walls of fact.³⁸

Besant, both in *The Eulogy* and in his autobiography, makes much of his insensitivity to nature, his blindness to her charms, giving his short-sightedness as cause, but several passages in the novel belie the assertion, raising the possibility that he had come to appreciate nature through reading Jefferies. He imagines the Whitechapel Road planted with lime and plane trees, while Angela as an undergraduette at Newnham

had gathered in the ugliest ditches round Cambridge the sweetest flowering mosses, the tenderest campion, the loveliest little herb robert.³⁹

That is not the language of a man without feeling for nature. That feeling is again shown in the country walks Angela and Harry take to Stratford, Hainault, Epping, and Waltham. There are other echoes of Jefferies, e.g. in the scene where Harry addresses the Stepney Advanced Club, which recalls the lively election meeting in *The Dewy Morn*. A central theme in the novel is that the poor must help themselves, one sounded also in *The Story of My Heart*, where it is extended to mankind as a whole. Jefferies says 'nothing is done for us'⁴⁰; we must do everything for ourselves.

However, though the novel is perfectly competent, a solid, well-crafted, middlebrow read, it is hardly inspired: Besant's mind and sensibility do not attract or excite. They are dull and pedestrian. The novel has dated. The characters are wooden, the story schematic. Besant lacks subtlety. The irony of the wealthy Angela and well-connected Harry passing *incogniti* is heavily underscored. Harry's uncle Bunker, a shark who has fleeced him, is grossly overdrawn, a larger-than-life sub-Dickensian villain. The characters are observed purely externally, with no attempt to get inside them. They are mere ciphers, made to do this or that, with no spontaneous life.

Besant has a toe-curling habit of addressing the reader in asides as 'My friends'. The story becomes tedious and plods towards its predictable conclusion. Perhaps Besant's most exasperating quality is the complacency of his authorial persona, in sharp contrast with the modesty of the actual man. In the autobiography he pompously prefaces his account of his solo ventures in fiction as follows:

it may, however, be of some use to young aspirants to know how a craftsman in their art worked — may I add? — *non sine gloriâ*, not without a certain measure of success.⁴¹

Besant the writer survives better in *The Eulogy*, the autobiography, and the books on London than in the novels. The passages in the autobiography describing his boyhood, his years at Cambridge, the beginnings of his literary career, his thoughts on writing and criticism, and above all his founding of the Society of Authors, are full of interest. And to the latter, Besant's major achievement, for which he earned just and enduring fame, we now turn.⁴²

The Society of Authors aimed at improving the financial position of writers, particularly in their dealings with publishers, some of whom Besant accused of dishonest practices. Its three main objects were the maintenance, definition and defence of literary property; the consolidation and amendment of the laws of domestic copyright; and the promotion of international copyright. It became in effect an authors' trades union. Besant was the dynamo, the driving force, behind the Society's formation and its work in the initial stages. The Society, it has been well said, could not have been born, or survived birth, without him. S. Squire Sprigge, future Secretary and Chairman of the Society, later said that the First Council and Committee

almost all gave their original adherence to 'oblige Besant'... He was loved as well as respected. He had gone to the top of the literary profession with a few quick strides, and success made no difference to him. The

absolutely simple, genial, unassuming man was unaltered... All Besant's friends followed him because they knew the man rather than his cause...⁴³

In 1884 Besant and some dozen other authors formed the Society with Lord Tennyson as president, and leaders in all branches of literature as vice-presidents. The latter included Lord Lytton and Matthew Arnold (poetry); Huxley (science); Froude (history); Cardinal Manning (theology); R.D. Blackmore, Wilkie Collins, and Charles Reade (fiction); and George Augustus Sala (journalism). In 1890 Besant organised the first Committee of Management and was Chairman from 1889 to 1892. He started *The Author*, a monthly magazine of propaganda, with himself as editor. In his lifetime he saw the membership of the Society grow from 68 to nearly 2000. The Society's endeavour to effect copyright reform was largely successful, and influenced legislation both in the UK and in America and Canada. Besant's chief aim however was to strengthen the author's right in his literary property, and to relieve him of traditional financial disabilities, which he ascribed in part to long-established customs of the publishing trade, in part to unscrupulous publishing practices, and in part to the unbusinesslike habits of most authors. His agitation brought him into conflict with publishers of high standing, who justly resented some of his sweeping generalisations about the nature of publishing operations. Like other campaigners he tended to exaggerate a case that was fundamentally sound. The results of his agitation were beneficial to authors. Besant established the crucial principle that authors' accounts with publishers should be subject to audit. He exposed many fraudulent practices on the part of disreputable publishers, and gave injured authors a ready means of redress. At Besant's instigation the Society's pension fund for impoverished authors was started in 1901, and though there is no direct evidence there can be little doubt that the example of Jefferies' unhappy end was a spur. In George Meredith's words, Besant was 'a valorous, alert, persistent advocate' of authors' rights, who sought 'to establish a system of fair dealing between the sagacious publishers of books and the inexperienced, often heedless producers' (*Author*, July 1901).⁴⁴ In 1895 Besant, who had already advocated the more frequent bestowal on writers of titles of honour, was knighted for his services to literature on Lord Rosebery's recommendation. To mark the occasion the Society of Authors held a public dinner, attended by nearly 250 guests.

In October 1894 Besant began what he considered his greatest work, a survey of modern London (commissioned by A. and C. Black,

publishers of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*) along the lines on which John Stow had treated the Tudor city. With the help of experts he arranged to describe the changing face of London from earliest times to the end of the nineteenth century. He embodied his preliminary researches in five general volumes: *London* (1892), *Westminster* (1895), *South London* (1898), *East London* (1901), and *The Thames* (1902). However the project was underfunded; Besant had numerous others on hand and underestimated the labour involved; and he died before completing the survey, which was finished by other hands and appeared in 10 illustrated volumes after his death.

In 1900 with (Sir) Arthur Conan Doyle, Lord Coleridge and others Besant originated the Atlantic Union, a Society for entertaining American visitors to England. During a visit to the United States in 1893 Besant had noticed a blind hostility towards England, fostered in part by the New York press. The Atlantic Union aimed at overcoming the prejudice by presenting such institutions as the House of Lords, the monarchy and church, as they were in fact, not fancy, to American visitors.

The list of good causes supported by Besant is almost endless: they included clubs for poor children in Hoxton and Radcliffe; the Home Arts Association; the Women's Bureau of Work; and the Ragged School Union. Besant was a governor of the [Royal] London Hospital, after writing a paper that raised thousands of pounds for it. He lectured in support of Free Public Libraries, and supported the social work of the Salvation Army, inveighing against the widespread hostility shown to the organisation. At home in Hampstead he was president of the *Hampstead Antiquarian Historical Society* and vice-president of the *Hampstead Scientific Society* and *Hampstead Arts Society*. Besant was also a prominent Freemason, and saw Freemasonry as a force for social and religious improvement in the world at large.

Besant lived at 'Froggnal End' (now 106 Froggnal, N.W.3) in what was 'a picturesque red house on a gentle eminence... approached by a path bordered by lawns and shady trees',⁴⁵

His well-lit study was 'literally like a room set in a garden'.⁴⁶ In 1874 he had married Mary Forster-Barham and they had four children: Philip, Celia, Geoffrey and Mary. The couple also looked after Sir Walter's nephew Digby, son of his younger brother Frank and his estranged wife Annie Besant, the celebrated theosophist writer and lecturer. Besant's eldest brother William was Senior Wrangler in 1850 and became an eminent mathematician, fellow of St. John's College, Cambridge, sister college of Christ's, both founded by Lady Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII.

Besant died at 'Frogna End' on 9 June 1901 of Bright's disease and was buried in the burial-ground off Church Row, N.W.3.⁴⁷ An outgoing gregarious endomorph, he was a very different man from Jefferies, but embodied the virtues of the best type of Victorian. Not only Jefferies' immediate family but all his admirers owe Besant a large debt of gratitude.

NOTES

(MM :- George Miller and Hugoe Matthews, *Richard Jefferies, A Bibliographical Study* (Aldershot; Scolar Press, 1993)).

1. 'Trees About Town,' *The Standard*, 28 September 1881, No. 17845, p.2, collected in *Nature Near London* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1883), pp.198-200.
2. I did not catch Ian Hislop's TV series 'The Do-gooders' (shown winter 2010), on Victorian philanthropists, so do not know if it featured Besant.
3. *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1888) was dedicated 'To the Widow and the Two Children of Richard Jefferies'.
4. Chatto and Windus re-issued *The Eulogy* in 1889, 1893, and 1905. See MM pp.531-2 and p.744.
5. Letter cited in Samuel J. Looker and Crichton Porteous, *Richard Jefferies Man of the Fields* (London: John Baker, 1965), pp.213-4.
6. Besant, p.167.
7. Besant, p.168.
8. Besant, p.169.
9. Besant, *ibid.*
10. Besant, p.170.
11. See MM, pp.529-533.
12. Cited MM, p.531.
13. The advertisements at the back of the first edition of *Nature Near London* include the three-volume edition of Besant's first solo novel *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* (1882) (p.19) and the novels he wrote in collaboration with James Rice (p.21 and p.23).
14. Besant, pp.167-8.
15. Edward Thomas, *Richard Jefferies, His Life and Work* [1909] (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), p.ix.
16. *Letters from Edward Thomas to Gordon Bottomley*, edited and introduced by R. George Thomas (London: OUP, 1968), p.154.
17. It should be emphasised that 'the [Jefferies] family liked [*The Eulogy*] very much' (Looker and Porteous, p.214).
18. *Autobiography of Sir Walter Besant*, with a Prefatory Note by S. Squire Sprigge (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1902), p.43.
19. *ibid.*, p.65.
20. Thomas (1909), pp.114-5.
21. *ibid.*, p.114.
22. Besant, *Autobiography*, p.98.
23. *ibid.*, p.141.
24. *ibid.*, p.xvii.
25. [W.B. Owen], 'Sir Walter Besant', entry in *The Dictionary of National Biography*, Supplement January 1901-December 1911, edited by Sir Sidney Lee, Volume 1

- (Oxford: OUP, 1976), p.153.
26. Besant, *Autobiography*, p.168. Jefferies once contemplated a Civil Service clerkship. See his letters to Aunt Ellen of 5 June and 12 July 1868, by when his interest had waned. (BL Add. MS 58822 vol.XX and *Richard Jefferies' Letters to Aunt Ellen* (Faringdon: Petton Books, 2009), pp.48-9 and p.56.)
 27. Besant, *Autobiography*, p.172.
 28. 'The Plainest City in Europe,' *Pall Mall Gazette*, 20 October 1883, collected in *The Life of the Fields* (1884).
 29. Besant, *Autobiography*, p.198.
 30. Letter cited (no date given) in website article on Sir Walter Besant.
 31. Besant, *Autobiography*, p.204.
 32. *ibid.*, p.200.
 33. Cited (no date given) in website article on Sir Walter Besant.
 34. Walter Besant, *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* [1882] (London; Chatto and Windus, 1897), p.115.
 35. *ibid.*, p.61.
 36. *The Story of My Heart* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1883), p.92.
 37. *ibid.*, p.120.
 38. *ibid.*, p.90.
 39. *All Sorts and Conditions of Men*, p.67.
 40. *The Story of My Heart*, p.137.
 41. Besant, *Autobiography*, p.203.
 42. The fullest account of the formation and work of the Society of Authors, and of Besant's role in it, is contained in Chapter 6 and 7, Volume 1, of *Authors by Profession* by Victor Bonham-Carter (London: the Society of Authors,1978).
 43. Cited in above, pp.125-6.
 44. Cited in [W.B. Owen], *op.cit.*, p.155.
 45. Sarah A. Tooley, article in *The Woman at Home* (1897), cited in website article on Sir Walter Besant.
 46. *ibid.*
 47. The site of Besant's grave is marked on the map inside the main entrance but the graves in that corner are either illegible or thickly overgrown with moss and brambles and I was unable to locate it. Besant's house stands opposite Froggnal Mansions where lived the soprano Kathleen Ferrier. It is semi-detached, late C18 or early C19, has four bays (the one at the side looks a modern extension) and four storeys, including basement and attic. The red brick has been painted cream. The front bears a blue plaque recording the residence of 'Sir Walter Besant Novelist and Antiquarian'. A short flight of steps leads up to the front door which is painted blue and has a moulded case with brackets. The mansard roof has two dormers. In the front garden is a rectangular pond.

An exchange of letters between the Bishop of Salisbury and Walter Besant

On the bookshelves of Swindon Public Library, Mr A S Hickerton found a rough draft of a letter pasted in the back of a first edition copy of Walter Besant's The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies, 1888. The book was in a plain white velum binding and also contained a card indicating that it was a presentation copy to the Bishop of Salisbury. The letter, which is marked as a "rough copy" in pencil, appears to be drafted by the Bishop of Salisbury to Walter Besant. The ink had faded and a pencil note was added at the end to indicate that the final letter sent to Besant had some changes and additions. The original letter from Besant to the Bishop was also found in the Library's archives. At that time the Bishop of Salisbury was the Right Reverend John Wordsworth (1843-1911), son of the Right Reverend Christopher Wordsworth who was a nephew of the poet William Wordsworth. John Wordsworth was the founder of Bishop Wordsworth's School in Salisbury. It was (and still is) a boys' Grammar School.

12 Gayton Crescent,
HAMPSTEAD.

May 28/[18]90

My Lord Bishop

I learn that your Lordship is interested in the erection of a bust to the memory of Richard Jefferies in your Cathedral... a thing for which all lovers of Jefferies will be deeply grateful.

I venture to send for your Lordship's acceptance a copy of my Life of Jefferies. I do not ask you to give your time to reading the whole of it but I would ask you to look at the chapter which deals with his very remarkable book called "The Story of my Heart." I may exaggerate its importance but to me it is a very wonderful thing that this man – after he had, for a time, discarded all faith – should simply by communing with nature & in the trust of long solitary meditation – arrive at the graced discovery that there must be a fuller life with a perfect soul dwelling in a perfect body. Perhaps this title of the character of this poor solitary wanderer may prove of interest to your Lordship: and in that hope I send the volume.

I remain –

my Lord Bishop

Your most obedient servant,



[Walter Besant]

The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies

by

Walter Besant

First edition 1888. Presentation
copy to the Bishop of Salisbury.

The Palace
Wells
Somerset

3 June 1890

My Dear Sir

I am much obliged to you for your kind letter & the interesting "Eulogy of Richard Jefferies" which accompanied or rather followed it. I read it through yesterday on the journey here from Salisbury with great pleasure & with gratitude to you for the skilful way in which you had brought out the strong and brilliant parts of his character without concealing his defects. Coate is I think in our Diocese, in the parish of Chiseldon, though Swindon is outside it – but I have never seen the Farmhouse in which he lived – I am very glad to hear that a bust is proposed for the Cathedral memorial & I shall be glad to subscribe to it if something more is necessary. I should be glad also to have Mrs Jefferies' address & to know what sort of person she is.

I read of course the Chapter you pointed at ("The Story of My Heart") with special interest and was rejoiced to see this "testimonium animae naturaliter Christiane"¹³ – as far as the participation of the body in the destiny of the soul is concerned – I cannot myself help connecting Jefferies' unhappiness & want of literary success – even in his best work, which is in parts so beautiful – with his loss of faith. When I compare him with two such kindred spirits as Charles Kingsley & William Barnes (whose names I mix in perhaps) I can imagine how much more beautiful his work would have been if the presence of God in nature & in human nature had been revealed to him more distinctly as that of a personal Holy Spirit. His treatment of nature seems hard beside Kingsley's. His treatment of peasant life (though not so cynical & repulsive as Thomas Hardy's in part is. I don't wish to speak badly of him, he has done good work, but he has previously offended against the better spirit of Dorset which is very dear to me) – is hard beside William Barnes.

The rough letter ends here but a note is added in pencil:

[I modified the censure of Hardy & put in a word about the Prelude & excursion & about the possible bad influence of Goethe on Jefferies]

¹³ Translation: testimony of the soul by nature Christian

Book Review

Richard Jefferies: An Anthology by Hugoe Matthews and Rebecca Welshman (Oxfordshire:Petton Books, 2010); £20.
ISBN 978-0-9563751-2-4.

Simon Coleman

Jefferies readers have recognised that a new and comprehensive anthology of his writing, a publication that would go beyond the several attractive but, in many ways, partial selections of the past, is overdue. The two compilers bring to this anthology a fresh and illuminating approach to Jefferies' writing that reflects their meticulous study of the whole range of his output. Hugoe Matthews, who is renowned for having read all Jefferies' published works in their original chronological sequence, has produced some major studies that include his mammoth *Bibliographical Study* (with George Miller, 1993) and *The Forward Life of Richard Jefferies* (with Phyllis Treitel, 1994). Rebecca Welshman, in her research at Exeter University, has shed new light on the influence of archaeology and the historical landscape on the development of Jefferies' creative imagination, and has also recently unearthed some of his 'lost' published articles and letters. They have produced a highly original selection that not only approaches Jefferies work from topical perspectives but allows the reader to follow the evolution of his thought over its breathtakingly diverse field of activity.

The organisation of the anthology demonstrates the compilers' grasp of the complex nature of Jefferies' writing career, with its shifting subject matter and pronounced evolution of tone and imaginative force. It was characteristic of Jefferies in his later years (c.1882-1887) to return to his old subjects with a broader outlook and heightened imaginative awareness, as well as to venture into thought-realms that are usually classed as philosophical or spiritual. In this period he revealed his increasing longing to express a 'higher set of ideas', drawn from an expanded awareness of human potential and escaping the mental limitations of past beliefs. This desire, that gradually fed into all his writing, can be detected in the few years before the publication of his autobiography *The Story of My Heart*, after which it rapidly gathered momentum.

The compilers have responded to the challenge of presenting both the full breadth of Jefferies' work and the maturing of his mind in a

novel way. The selections, which are quotations varying in size from two pages to a single sentence, are arranged in twenty-two sections by topic. The titles of these are as follows: 'The Elements', 'Nature and Man', 'Birds and Flight', 'Plants', 'Animals', 'The Agricultural Labourer', 'Farming', 'Homes and Gardens', 'Rural Life', 'Guns and the Gamekeeper', 'London and the River', 'Politics and Money', 'The Justice System', 'The Human Condition', 'Childhood', 'People', 'Medical Matters', 'The Mind', 'Books and Writing', 'Art', 'Religion' and 'Time'. The sections appear in groups of three, four or five, with the exception of 'The Elements' and 'Time' which stand alone. For example, the five sections from 'The Agricultural Labourer' to 'Guns and the Gamekeeper' are presented as a group of related topics. There is naturally some overlap but this brings a fluidity to the structure and a focus on specific Jefferies interests that a single large section titled, for example, 'Agriculture and Rural Life', would have displayed less effectively. A full section on 'Homes and Gardens' might appear surprising, but the sensitively-selected passages from his first 'country books', from *Landscape and Labour*, *Toilers of the Field* and his later collections remind us of how much Jefferies had to say about the manner of living in his day, in both town and country. The section encompasses his singular observations on, for example, the aesthetic value of old English mugs and bowls, the imposing former gentleman's residence that houses a country solicitor's office, and the inexplicable tendency of well-to-do people to place fruit-bearing trees in the vegetable garden.

Jefferies had a tendency to introduce a sudden penetrating insight into a particular matter among otherwise simple descriptive passages. By extracting many shorter passages and single sentences the anthology gives some unexpected examples of his bold and individual approach to life, a feature likely to be of particular value to less experienced Jefferies readers who would otherwise have little to guide them to these gems. Isolated punchy statements, such as 'Most of the landscape painting in vogue today is nature in a dress coat', are interspersed with longer extracts that do full justice to the observational brilliance and haunting intensity of his best writing. Another important feature of the book is the chronological arrangement of the quotations within each section. This allows the reader to trace the movement of Jefferies' style, his range of ideas and power of expression as he began to suffuse his writing with his vision of an ideal human life – one that might bring 'an end and outcome' to the infinite beauty and magic of nature.

In their introduction the compilers explain that they have avoided

placing writings that express Jefferies' mystical questionings and desire for 'soul-life' into a discrete section because they wish to show how these influences permeated many areas of his work throughout his career. This subtle approach, in my opinion, works well and, in any case, the later sections such as 'The Human Condition', 'The Mind' and 'Time', are obvious places to look for some of the finest expression of his ideal of life, presenting a dimension of thought that perceives something eternal within mortal existence. I find the section on 'Art' a very welcome inclusion, as Jefferies wrote with power and insight on this subject at all stages of his career. The section begins with two illuminating quotations about paintings from *Restless Human Hearts*, and by the time the passage about the Venus Accroupie statue (from 'Nature in the Louvre', *Field and Hedgerow*) is reached, we have been shown an artistic perception that had little to do with conventional taste and formalised styles. The superb extract from *Amaryllis at the Fair* describing the method of the artist, Alere Flamma, illustrates well that Jefferies sought truth in art. Jefferies saw nature herself as the ideal artist, concluding that 'The lover of nature has the highest art in his soul'.

It is pleasing to see the inclusion of many passages from novels, including his three earliest, and from some articles that have not previously been reprinted from the journals and newspapers in which Jefferies published them. Occasionally, and perhaps inevitably, a passage can feel slightly out of place in a particular section, but this merely adds an element of unpredictability to the content, a characteristic well in keeping with the working of Jefferies' mind.

This volume, in my opinion, completely achieves the compilers' objectives to present a rich diversity of themes and ideas, as well as demonstrating the way Jefferies' writing gradually developed within these. With the sources of all the quotations clearly given, the anthology is also an excellent starting point for new readers. Included also are a few reproductions of original illustrations for Jefferies' works. The great care taken in the selection and arrangement of the subject areas and their content has resulted in a truly unbiased compilation that deserves to be on the shelf of all Jefferies' enthusiasts. It is a reminder that he was an author who will always defy categorization, as there was practically no subject on which he did not write something at some time.

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