



One of Wiltshire's Illustrious Sons

Richard Jefferies

By Ann Russell

On 16th November, 1848 Richard Jefferies was born at Coate Farm, Chiseldon, near Swindon. His father, James Luckett Jefferies, and mother were justly proud of their son, but, as small and humble farmers, could have had little idea of just how proud they would become of their son Richard when he reached maturity.

Although both came from typical English farming stock, Richard's parents were born in London, where their families were part-owners of a printing and publishing concern. However, when they married, the Jefferies moved into the country and were given the tenancy of Coate Farm by its owner, Richard Jefferies, James's grandfather.

Grandfather Jefferies was a miller and baker in his own right, owning a shop in Swindon High Street and his mill near Hold Road Church. An obvious businessman, he also owned this small farm, where corn for his mill and bread would be grown.

However, as fate would have it, James was not a successful farmer. The uneasy life of the family at Coate Farm is described in detail in one of Richard's early books, *Amaryllis at the Fair*. As time went by, it became apparent that Richard Jefferies had little interest in practical farming, although his love and knowledge of country life, its farming, and its politics, was immense and is well illustrated in his books *Toilers of the Field* and *Field and Farm*. His official schooling consisted in the main of private tuition in Swindon, where he was versed in classical translation, Latin and Greek, as well as the normal subjects, and was still quite young when he decided to become a writer.

He became a staff reporter for the *North Wiltshire Herald* and later for the *Wilts and Gloucester Standard* at Cirencester. During this period he undertook a great deal of freelance work and wrote several novels which were not successful. At 24 he began to make a name for himself. His first success was when two of his letters appeared in *The Times*. They were about the Wiltshire labourer. This, amongst other things, quickly established him as an authority on the country life in South-West England. Editors of well-known magazines and newspapers began to clamour for his essays; he began producing them at a furious rate and later published them in book form under such titles as *The Gamekeeper at Home*, *Wild Life in a Southern County*, *The Amateur Poacher*, and *The Open Air*.

Jessie Bader became Mrs Richard Jefferies in 1874. They were married at Chiseldon Church and lived for a short time at the farm and later at Victoria Road, Swindon. He led a happy and seemingly contented life at this address with his family (a baby son) until 1877, when the call of London, its money and close contact with the publishing world, became too great. He left Wiltshire never to return, except for brief visits.

He left Wiltshire in body but not in mind, and it was not until he had left that he wrote recollections of his boyhood in stories like *Greene Ferne Farm*, *The Dewy Morn* and *Wood Magic*.

The Jefferies family moved around from place to place in London, experiencing new places, new faces, collection new material. They spent some time living in the lodge at Tolworth Hall, where Jefferies wrote *Nature Near London*. He loved the country and was regarded suspiciously by many a landowner, as it was thought that perhaps he was no longer "The Amateur Poacher". Possibly in defence of himself he once wrote: "I have entered many a wood just for the pleasure of creeping through the brake and thickets. Destruction in itself was not the motive, it was an overpowering instinct for woods and fields. Yet woods and fields lose half their interest without a gun – I like the power to shoot, even though I may not use it".

Jefferies, like many of his contemporaries, wrote incessantly and with a fervor common to authors. Although much of his research came from the fresh air of the countryside, he was not a strong man and his health eventually gave out in 1881. From this time on, although suffering and in and out of hospital, Jefferies wrote many of his best books. He now lived at Goring-on-Sea, near Worthing in Sussex, and his last book was dictated to his wife, when he was too weak to hold a pen. He died on 14th August, 1877, three months before his 40th birthday. He was buried at Broadwater Cemetery, Worthing.

Two Memorials, one erected in 1938 and the other in 1939, now stand on the Wiltshire Downs, overlooking the countryside that Jefferies loved so much.

One, a plaque of aluminium alloy, is affixed to the Ordnance Survey triangulation pyramid on Liddington Hill (905 feet), and bears the inscription: "Liddington Hill: the hill beloved of Richard Jefferies and Alfred Williams". (Alfred Williams was a South Marston writer of the countryside, later than Jefferies.)

The other, a sarsen stone bearing two bronze plaques, was erected on Burderop of Barbury Down (880 feet). The plaques again commemorate Jefferies and Williams.

The inscription on one plaque, with a passage from *The Story of My Heart*, runs:

Richard Jefferies, 1848-1887.

"It is eternity now. I am in the midst of it. It is about me in the sunshine."

In 1950 a Richard Jefferies Society was formed in Swindon. The membership has increased steadily and includes lovers of Jefferies' works in this country and in Italy, France, America, Canada, and New Zealand. It is interesting to note that members are to be found in the universities of Oxford, Cambridge, London, Paris (The Sorbonne), Milan and Toronto.

Jefferies once went into his publishers' office and was told his books were not selling. Quietly he replied: "One day I think they will be read". And he was right.

{Footnote: A room in Richard Jefferies birthplace at Coate is now well established as a Richard Jefferies Museum. In it are exhibited first editions, manuscripts of the writer's books, pictures, photographs and, among other items, the table at which he wrote and the old oak chest where he kept his papers and personal belongings.}

(Original source not recorded)