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The RICHARD JEFFERIES SOCIETY (Registered Charity No. 1042838) was founded in 1950 to promote appreciation and study of the writings of Richard Jefferies (1848-1887). Its activities include the Annual General Meeting and Birthday Lecture, winter meetings, summer outings, special events, and the publication of a Summer *Journal*, spring and autumn Newsletters and an Annual Report. Membership is open to all on payment of the current annual subscription: £12.00 – individual; £14.00 – couple (UK rate).

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The principal aim of *The Richard Jefferies Society Journal* is to present material by Jefferies that has not been published or reprinted, or that is difficult to obtain, together with articles about Jefferies (commissioned or submitted), items of research and discovery, synopses of talks and lectures, book reviews, information relating to places where Jefferies lived, and correspondence.

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The Monkbourne Mystery

Richard Jefferies

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Those who doubt the existence of those subtle, human influences which fine organisations have ever believed in, do not question the exhilarating effect of the soft yet cool air, the warm sun, the bright green grass, studded with yellow and white flowers of a May morning. Why, then, if the emanations from matter can cause a delicious languor to pervade the frame, should not that wonderful electrical machine, the human body, possess at least equal powers?

The mavis sang, and would not cease,
Sitting upon the spray;
So loud, he wakened Robin Hood
In greenwood where he lay.

The great sun, already high in the heavens, poured out a flood of love upon the teeming earth. It was a May morning—a *true* May morning; who can say more? But often how incongruous are the human accompaniments to the lovely scenes of nature!

“Church!” said Sir Anthony Tracy, in his thin, jerky tones. “There’s *the* church, and there’s the d——d imitation. Church, burial, cremation—who says there’s anything queer in cremation? I say, Vicar, what’s your opinion?”

“The practice of the Church has always been to bury the dead,” replied the gentle voice of the clergyman by his side—a voice full and yet soft,—an index of his kind and benevolent nature. But the restless baronet’s thoughts had jumped on again by this time.

“Putrefaction, Mr. Vicar!—why, I tell you, it’s horrid! Smelt it myself too much in the Chinese war; marched up the Ying-Yang-Yung, you know,—see it in the maps; dead bodies all the way. By-the-bye, extraordinary thing happened there—chance or providence—we’ll discuss that presently. I had a splendid diamond ring—one big stone, gave two hundred guineas for it, ’pon honour. Had it on my right middle finger,—see? We were ordered to storm one of their mud forts, cannon firing at us all the time. So I just waved my sword over my head and cried, ‘On lads!’ when whiz came a round shot, and cut the big diamond clean out of the ring!”

“Without even scratching you?” added the vicar, who knew his friend’s foible.

“Just so! But here’s the point, sir: these cannon were fixed, the lubber’s did not know how to put them on carriages, they were immovably fixed. Now, sir, was it chance or providence that directed that ball?”

The baronet stood still and faced the vicar with a stern frown on his face. The vicar looked down and seemed to ponder deeply. As they paused two others of the party overtook them.

“Didn’t I hear you say something about cremation, sir?” said Ernest Tracy, in a respectful tone.

“Why, yes; and putridity and emanations, and all that. My old cook, sir—old thief!—

saved enough in my service to go to London and set up a confectioner's shop and dining-room in Oxford Street. Well, he did a rattling business; till one day another fellow came and set up in the same line next to him. Now, this fellow was a poet, and all the ladies patronised him, and with the ladies went the other customers and Cookey grew desperate. Cunning old scoundrel, sir, his area ran right under the doorway of his rival's shop, curious underground cellars; everybody who walked into the poet's shop walked over Cookey's grating. Cookey set a trap and caught half a dozen rats, killed 'em, put 'em in a box, hermetically sealed down, like your coffins, Mr. Vicar, only he had a valve and a tap to turn on when he liked. People came along hungry and eager, went to step into the poet's shop, when, just as they put their foot on the grating, Cookey turned on his tap, and whew! sir, they had to hold their noses and run for it. In three months the poet gave up business. Finest argument, sir, for cremation."

"Papa, dear, there's old William—speak to him," said Dora Tracy.

The loquacious old squire turned at once to talk to the aged sexton, whose name was also Tracy. In this village, as in many others, almost all the inhabitants were of one or two general names, and the whole parish were thus related. Not that the relationship was near enough to come within the definition of cousinship; but somehow or other, in a roundabout way by inter-marriage, perhaps two generations ago or more, they had all partides of the same blood in their veins. From Tracy the sexton, up to Tracy of Tracy Towers, all Monkbourn was one dan, a condition of affairs which led to a pleasant degree of familiarity between superiors and inferiors, but also to the inordinate pride of the head of place.

Ernest and Dora walked on, and the vicar, after a minute's pause for courtesy sake, hurried after them.

"Ernest, my boy," he said, "I want you to give me your fervid opinion as an Oxford scholar, and fully versed in all learning of the day, which is much deeper than in my time,—where *did* the original altar stand in this antique old church of mine? The Bishop, who is, as you know, deeply interested in the decision of the Privy Council on the Ritualistic questions, is continually pressing me to solve the doubt at any cost. It is the oldest church in his diocese, therefore the testimony would be most valuable. 'Now these restorations are about,' he says 'is the time to make the search.' He hints that he should not mind if I pulled the whole place down; and also at reward and preferment. Not that I would ever leave dear old Monkbourn for any gain; but I am anxious to satisfy his lordship. I have searched in vain. You young—the young have ideas—inspiration, almost. Now, go round the place carefully."

By this time they had arrived at the church porch. The vicar pushed open the door, which was ajar, and Ernest and Dora entered. The vicar waited in the yard for the squire. The great building was full of dust from the works in progress; but there were no workmen there at the time. Ernest saw this in a moment. One hurried glance round, and he snatched Dora to his side, and pressed a hot, lingering kiss upon her lips. The slight, graceful figure of the girl seemed to ding to him. Her straw hat fell back, her long, flowing light hair mingled with his curling chesnut locks. From the painted glass overhead there fell aslant one long beam of sunlight, made visible by the dust in the atmosphere, which glowed up her hair like gold, and blessed them as from heaven. Among the tombs

and the dust of other days their draught of love was taken—scarcely taken before a footstep on the gravel without made Dora start and blush, and disengage herself. But the footstep did not enter, and she arranged her hat; and the pair commenced a minute tour of the walls in silence, till Ernest emboldened by the alarm passing away, took her hand in his.

“This must not—must not be,” said Dora. “If papa——”

“I know—I know,” cried Ernest, flushing red in an instant. “Because I was only a ploughboy till the vicar took me up—because I have won my place by hard work—because I am only the curate here in my native village—*only the curate*—I am a dog.”

“Hush—hush!” said Dora, “you are unkind. Do *I* care about these things? You know *I* love you. But I cannot help papa’s follies. If he for one moment guessed,—oh, Ernest! sometimes I wish he would take me right away so that I might never see you any more; for this deceit is so wretched, and we shall never——”

“So you want to leave me,” said Ernest, with a lover’s injustice, “just as I was so happy. I thought it so lucky he lost the election through upsetting the manufacturing people, so that you did not go to town. I believe that’s where you wish to be, in all the gaiety and excitement!”

Dora did not reply; but he saw, as he cast an angry glance at her, that tears had gathered in her large blue eyes; and knowing well her delicate health and her sensitive nature, his heart smote him. But, before he could endeavour to make amends, the door creaked on its hinges, and the squire and the vicar entered.

“Why, all the pews are gone, and I want to sit down!” said the squire. “It’s so precious warm.”

“Come into the vestry-room,” said the vicar—“there are seats there; the pews are being altered.”

So they all sat down in the vestry, which was at one side of the chancel, with an enormously thick wall between it and the stalls for the choir. It was cool here, though the room, as the vicar said, was inconveniently small. He thought it had originally been part of a chapel in the Catholic times; for, cleaning off the whitewash, the men had found a portion of a rude painting representing St. Catherine and her wheel. No doubt, much of the old building had been taken down in the Reformation days; for, in clearing away the earth round the wall outside which had accumulated two feet deep and caused dampness, they had come upon foundations, and part of a pavement of square tiles, each bearing figures of grotesque animals.

“Dora, my dear,” said the vicar, “how pale you look! I was just going to ask you to play to us on the organ.”

“Oh, yes, do!” said Ernest eagerly, thinking, “I shall have to escort her up into the gallery.”

“I will presently,” said Dora; but I feel a little faint,—do not move. It is a strange feeling; I have had it before.”

“Who’s that? Come in!” said Ernest, stepping towards the door of the vestry to hide his concern, for he blamed himself for Dora’s indisposition. He opened the door; but there was no one there. Yet they had all heard a distinct knocking. He returned.

“Shall I bring a glass of water?” he said.

“Who is that?” for there was another three or four knocks in rapid succession.

“It’s the workmen,” said the squire, at the same time that he exchanged a rapid glance with the vicar.

“No; they have all gone to dinner,” said Ernest.

“I feel better now,” said Dora ; “I will go and play. Papa, what is that noise?—it is right in the wall.”

She pointed to the thick wall between them and the chancel.

“Listen—there it is again! How peculiar!”

Ernest went out into the chancel.

“There is no one the other side,” he said; “while I was in the chancel I heard it also in the wall towards you in the vestry.”

“And we heard it towards you in the chancel,” said Dora. “Papa, how funny this is!”

“Let us go out, my dear, into the sunshine,” said the vicar. “It is better than this cold place.”

“But there’s the tapping again,” said Dora, all her feminine curiosity excited. “I’ll go and see.”

She ran round into the chancel, and put her ear close to the wall. Directly she heard a succession of taps between her and the vestry, as it seemed in the very wall itself. Yet they sounded muffled and an immense way off, and had a slight metallic tinkle.

“This is, indeed, very singular!” said Ernest, who had followed her. “I begin to believe it is spirit-rapping.”

“Spirit-rapping!” thundered the squire— “what, in *my* church? Sir, there’s no such thing as spirit-rapping; it’s all a pack of extravagant lies!”

“I did not say it was spirit-rapping,” said Ernest, calmly. “I do not believe in the spirits of the dead returning to tap on a table; but I do think that there is something in the psychic force proved to exist by Sergeant Cox and his friends. I see nothing more wonderful in it than in electricity.”

The sound of the tapping was heard again as he ended.

“I will see into this,” added Ernest.

“Yes, do,” said Dora. “I am so curious.”

“Well, tell him the story, vicar. It won’t hurt Dora,—there’s nothing in it.”

So the vicar told the two young people that these tappings in the chancel wall had been heard from time immemorial. Dora had not heard of it, because she had not lived much at home in the parish, being generally away at the sea or in Southern France; and Ernest had left the parish too young to remember it. It was only heard occasionally, and, as it seemed, when certain people came near the wall. His wife, who was a delicate woman, always heard it if she came to him in the vestry-room. Sometimes one of the choir would hear it, and would not rest till his seat was changed, so great was the superstitious awe with which it was regarded, although no evil effect had ever been manifested. There was not the slightest tradition as to the cause. He never heard it if he entered the church alone; it seemed as if only here and there one had the power of calling forth these curious knocks.

“Mediums,” thought Ernest to himself, and glanced at Dora— fair, slight, delicate, sensitive. Here was the solution. Whatever there was in that old wall, Dora’s unconscious

psychic force had evoked it into action.

Insensibly the vicar, as he talked, had led them out of the church by the chancel door, and they now stood in the churchyard, on a high grassy bank. Deep below gurgled along the broad brook, which was called the "Bourne," beside which the "monk" had dwelt, shining dear in the sunlight. On the very opposite bank, not twenty feet from where they stood, rose up the towers of a second church. The squire shook his fist at it, and broke out into very objectionable language.

"I wish I had two or three pieces of Cromwell's artillery," said he; "I'd level the rotten old place, and spit the d——d old rector like a lark. There!" and he crossed his arms on his breast as if immensely relieved, and glared at the unoffending building.

"It is very singular," said the vicar, "perhaps unexampled, two churches so near together, with a trout stream running between and forming the boundary of the parishes."

"And it's very singular," foamed the squire, ironically, "that I own the biggest part of both parishes, and that one rector's a gentleman and the other a blackguard, who invites the factory people over there to vote against me, because I am turning two hundred acres of barren furze into good arable land to grow corn to stuff their lazy mouths with."

The vicar made no answer, but turned homewards. He knew there were faults on both sides. The squire was right in cultivating the common-land, which was utterly barren and useless except for half-a-dozen donkeys to roll about on; but he was wrong to do so in so high-handed a way, as if the poor had no feelings or rights. The rector, Mr. Benson, was a fiery-tempered man, and he was wrong in taking so active a part in setting the poor against a really good landlord, and yet morally right in resisting what he deemed oppression.

Benson was a new man, and did not know the squire's temperament. Anthony Tracy, with all his faults, his rage, his Munchausen-like ability at "fabling," was too just to injure any man, and would have made full compensation, had not Benson, without waiting to inquire into his intentions, rushed, as it were, at him, and then up went the blood of Tracy, and all chance of conciliation was over for the time. The sorest part of it to the squire—even sorer than losing his election after seven-and-twenty years in parliament—was Benson's discovery that there was a flaw in the title-deeds by which he held Tracy Towers.

Benson was not quite accurate in his information; but he had found out enough to terribly upset the squire, who knew that he had a perfect moral right, and probably, a legal one, founded on two centuries of possession by his family, but who, proud to a degree, could not bear the insinuation that a flaw did exist. Benson declared to the factory people that if the squire had no title to Tracy Towers, what right had he to the "green," which had been called the common from time immemorial? If he was not lord of the manor, what right had he to despoil the poor? He, the speaker, had told the squire so to his face, and had proclaimed it on the house-top, and the squire had taken no action against him for what would have been slander, which demonstrated that the squire was afraid. Afraid—he, a Tracy, afraid! Yet he could not horse-whip a dergyman. Dora and Ernest had gone on in advance: he had taken advantage of the opportunity to humble himself for his injustice; and she smiled, and that was enough. They were talking of the

mysterious knocking, and Ernest was dedaring his intention to get at the bottom of it.

“Bramleigh,” said the squire presently, after he had cooled down; “you are a good man. Look at that fellow, Ernest, you never did a better deed than when you took that boy from the plough, and had him trained for college.”

“He was such a handsome boy,” said the vicar, apologetically.

“If his parents’ poor old Betsy and Bob, were alive, what would they think of him now?” said the squire.

“He has a wonderful genius,” said the vicar, who never lost an opportunity of praising Ernest to the squire; for he had more than a suspicion of his protégé’s affection for Dora, and wished to pave the way if possible.

They parted at the vicarage-gate for luncheon; Ernest and the vicar went in; Dora and her father walked slowly up the great avenue of elms which led to Tracy Towers. Towers there were once, but they had disappeared in Elizabeth’s time, and the present Mansion was a fine specimen of the style that prevailed in that reign. Dora was musing of Ernest, but with her dreamy love there mingled reflections upon those curious rappings which he had promised to unravel for her.

And the high elms o’er head,
Dark shadows woven with their aërial looms
Shot through with golden thread.

Ernest had no great difficulty in persuading the vicar to allow the workmen to excavate the wall of the church. To tell truth, the vicar was himself curious about it. Ernest returned to the church immediately after lunch, and quickly had the masons at work. They heard nothing of the knocking now; but the men were acquainted with the fact that there were such knockings from time to time, and they were as eager as Ernest. The vicar was not present; he had promised to dine that evening at some distance. Ernest had marked both sides of the wall with his pencil, exactly at the spot where the sound appeared to come from. It was rather low down—about the height of the waist from the floor. They first dislodged a stout wall of stone, which gave them less difficulty than they expected, because there had been little or no mortar used in it. But after that came an inner casing of brick, which was as firm as a rock, and had to be literally cut away with chisels, so hard was the cement. The blows reverberated as if there was a hollow space beyond, and at last the tool laid bare a narrow vertical shaft in the thickness of the wall which went upwards a short distance, but downwards somewhat farther, except at one side, where was a ledge or bench of solid stone. In the daylight one of the men hastily thrust his hand in and drew forth a skull, at which there was a buzz of astonishment. Ernest called for a light to explore farther, and one struck a match. He saw something glitter, stooped and took out a heavy globe of metal apparently steel, burnished to the extreme of brilliance, and in no degree tarnished by its long entombment. He saw his own figure reflected on it, when his hand touched something, and turning it round he saw the finger-bones of what had once been a long, slender woman’s hand adhering to the under side of the globe as if it had lain in her palm. So ghastly seemed that dasp that he let it fall, and in a moment the bones crumbled into dust. Nor could they find anything else in the cell, or tomb, except there was a piece of metal let into the opposite side of the chamber, but so corroded with rust that they had no idea of what use it might have been.

Ernest ordered the opening to be dosed with boards, and hastened away to the vicarage, where he left the skull, and then to the Towers, to show Dora the metal ball, which glistened red and fiery as he held it in his hand in the beams of the sinking sun. Dora had visitors, amongst them an aunt whom he did not care to meet; so, much disappointed, he wrote a few lines on a slip from his pocket-book, and asked the servant who knew him well to give it to her when she was alone.

That ball of steel glittered in the light of the candles on Dora's dressing-table that night as she retired; the few lines from Ernest were placed under her pillow. The squire had gone to the same party as the vicar.

I know not how these things happen, but happen they most assuredly do. Wherever the extremity of human passion has been endured there lingers a sense of a presence; even the long habitation of a house without any tragedy endues it with a peculiar influence, which may, at any time take shape, as in the "Moated Grange."

Old faces glimmered through the door —
Old footsteps trod the upper floor.

It may have been that the invisible emanation from that bony band had sunk as it were its story in the solid steel which will absorb the electric fluid; and why not the still more subtle emanations of that mystery of mysteries, a human being?

But it happened, in the middle of the night she dreamt that she arose, and went and stood by the window with the steel globe in her hand, and watched the moonlight play upon it, and she saw the reflection of her own pale face; and yet, at the same time, she knew she dreamt and could feel her body was in bed. Gazing on the stars, still there grew before her eyes in the depths of the mirror, first a mist like the falling dew of a summer evening, and then the mist revolved itself into a slow moving succession of scenes, in which the figures did not speak, but somehow she felt their deeds. It was an imperfect vision, and the edges were blurred and grew into each other. The costumes were those of many centuries ago, the principal figure a lady, low-browed and by no means handsome, but with a peculiar animal-like look. This lady worked miracles, cured the diseased, but scoffed at Holy Church and led an immoral life. Not for this last, but because she obstinately refused to employ her marvellous gifts for the purposes of the monks, they tried her for witchcraft and heresy, and interred her alive in the wall of Monkbourne Church. The horror of it was, that Dora felt there was some indistinct link, some resemblance between herself and this wretched, unfortunate medium, who, born before her time, had suffered so awful a death.

Dora awoke in the morning ill and feverish; but a little stimulant restored her, and at dinner that day—the vicar and the curate regularly dined on the Wednesdays at the Towers—she told her story.

"I have very little doubt in my own mind," said the vicar; "that the being whose bones are now laid bare was indeed immured alive."

"And I have no doubt whatever, as an anatomist, that she possessed extraordinary powers of an animal and subtle character," said Ernest; "for I have never seen a skull so low in character except the famous Neanderthal head, which belonged to primitive man. She may have been a powerful medium—charged, like a Leyden jar, with animal magnetism, which, she did not understand and could not control. These magic mirrors

were common in those days—I should like to examine it more closely.”

He carried it to the vicarage that night, sat down in his own room—for he resided with his patron—to examine the mysterious ball. It sounded hollow, and did not weigh so heavy as solid iron would have done. This idea once obtained, his next thought, was to open it, but how? there was no apparent joint. At last, bringing the lamp nearer and turning the globe round, it struck him that the reflection of his own face was not exactly accurate. It was as if cut in two, and the halves not precisely fitted. He went to work with his microscope, and soon, found that the globe was formed of two hemispheres in some way delicately adjusted together. An hour later the vice of the village blacksmith unscrewed the halves, and there fell out a piece of folded parchment, yellow, but perfectly preserved. There was a large seal attached, Ernest did not attempt to unfold the deed, for so it looked, but hurried back with his discovery to the vicar. The young Oxford scholar did not pretend to an intimate acquaintance with the intricate court-hand of medieval days, than which species of writing probably nothing more difficult to a beginner was ever invented, not even excepting the Egyptian hieroglyphics. But Mr. Bramleigh, like most thoughtful village dergymen, was an enthusiastic and painstaking antiquary. He pronounced it at once a deed of the fifteenth century, and carried it into his study.

Next morning, at eleven o'clock, Dora came down to the vicarage, *en route* to the church; for she had the greatest curiosity to see the chamber in which the skull had been found. She said that the squire would follow her in a few minutes. The vicar was still busy with his deed, and Ernest walked on with her alone. In the course of a real and delicate love, how few words are spoken! These two passed almost the whole distance without exchanging anything more than the most common-place remarks. But her dress at times touched him; her eyes met his, their lips half opened to speak, and no words came. They felt what was in each other's heart—a deeper language than, the articulate was weaving its eloquent spell around them. But in the church there were workmen, which partly destroyed the charm, and Ernest devoted himself to explaining the position and size of the chamber to her.

“Why, what is this?” he called to one of the workmen; “the piece of rusted metal is gone.”

The man said that the vicar himself came down in the very early morning, and took it with him to the vicarage.

“I'll get inside,” said Ernest, “then you can imagine what a horrible death it must have been if the poor wretch was really walled up alive in this cramped space.” Before Dora could object he was inside, and found that he could not stand upright, but must sit upon the stone bench. Putting his hand upon this for a moment he felt a moulding, and called to the workmen for a light. A lantern was brought, and Ernest examined the bench upon his knees. In a moment he sprang out of the chamber all over dust, and in a state of great excitement. “It's the altar—it's the altar!” he exclaimed; “I must tell Mr. Bramleigh.” Rapidly he explained the importance of the discovery to Dora, and they went to the great doors, which were partly open; but here sweet opportunity delayed him. In the deep porch, out of sight from either side, the door dosed behind, only a stretch of green landscape in front—how could he help it? his arm was round her waist, his lips were pressed to hers. One moment of intense happiness; the next a loud volley of oaths. There

was the squire, as it appeared, rising out of the very earth in front of them. He had gone down into one of the vaults which had been opened, and had come up just in time to see the embrace. His fury knew no bounds; he called Ernest everything, from a low-born ploughboy upwards—pushed Dora away when, in an agony of shame and fear, she tried to cling to him; and finally marched off, vowing vengeance, and dragging the poor girl with him. Ernest, miserable in the extreme, and yet burning with impotent rage at the taunts which had been flung at him, walked rapidly from the spot, till he gained a fireplace, and hid himself in its dark, damp recesses. Here he passed, perhaps, the bitterest hour of his life; for he knew that he must leave Monkbourne; and having lost the squire's patronage, how could he ever hope for a benefice, so as to give him a chance even of aspiring to Dora's hand? At length he determined to quit the church, and to seek his fortune in America; and he returned to the vicarage to communicate his intention to Mr. Bramleigh. Unannounced he entered the study, and so absorbed was Mr. Bramleigh that he did not notice the gloomy frown on his protégé's brow, nor the deadly pallor of his face.

"My dear Ernest," he said, "I was just going to send for you. This is most, most, *most* extraordinary—I have fathomed it at last. See, here is the deed you found so ingeniously in the steel globe. Here is my translation of it. Now, what do you think that deed is—eh? (in a tone of triumph); why, it's the very original charter granting the manors of Tracy Towers to the first Tracy (his voice rose to a squeak of ecstasy, and his cheek flushed with all a true antiquary's delight). Here is the seal and all perfect; but how did it get in the ball? Ah! that's the riddle; but I've found it out, my boy—I've found it out! Sixteen hours I've pored over it, my boy—now look!" He held up a brass plate engraved. "This is the flat piece of rusty metal you despised and left attached to the wall. In this sense, my dear Ernest, nothing is despicable—*nothing*. This plate has an inscription. I recovered it by using chemicals—it was horribly, barbarously abbreviated; but it read to the effect that Matilda Tracy was buried here alive—no doubt, for witchcraft, heresy, and breaking her vow of chastity, when, as a widow, she had entered a nunnery. Horrible, but so interesting; but now you will say who *was* Matilda Tracy, and I can tell you that, thanks to the old parchments up at the Towers, which the squire lets me turn over as I choose. Matilda Tracy was the heiress of the Towers, and she married; but her husband died before the birth of their child, and on the ground that the child was not legitimate—a shameful and unjust calumny—her cousin, a powerful baron, seized the Towers and ejected Matilda, who was forced into a nunnery at the age of twenty-three. I cannot tell whether she did, or did not, break her vows. We have seen her skull; it is a low, animal type. At all events, we know the ultimate cruel end she endured. I should have found it out long ago, only there was the difficulty in what nunnery was she immured. But from this deed it appears that Monkbourne Church, and the church, Mr. Benson's, on the opposite side of the brook, must have been parts of an old monastic establishment; and at some time since, the brook has changed its course, and divided the portion that remained standing. I had a suspicion that the brook had changed its course before: now I am certain of it. But now comes the point. This deed is the very deed the absence of which Benson taunted the squire with,—it gives him full power to deal with the common-land which never was common-land, properly. He will be wild with delight. He

owes it all to your ingenuity. One thing more I must tell you now: when I—I adopted you [he could not say, took you up] I traced back your pedigree, an easy thing in a small parish where the registers were well kept and where the parties have never left it. Undoubtedly, you are a true Tracy, a direct descendant of Matilda Tracy's unfortunate son, who grew up a menial instead of inheriting his right—the Towers. You may call yourself the real heir; not that I induce you to go to law, for as the n——s say—

Massa go to law, law be very funny;
Massa get the law, but the lawyer get the money.

The old gentleman's eyes positively sparkled with delight at the success of his researches.

"I can put the capital on the column you have erected," said Ernest at last, forcing himself to speak calmly; "I have found the altar."

So great was Bramleigh's excitement at this news, that he dragged poor Ernest back to the church, totally oblivious of the dulness of his companion, of the gloom upon his face.

"Your fortune is made, Ernest," said the vicar, as, satisfied at last, they returned to the vicarage. "The bishop will be overjoyed. I shall recommend you. I could not leave Monkbourne—besides, it is your due."

"My fortune is lost, rather," said Ernest, in a low, trembling tone. Then, for the first time, the vicar saw that something was wrong; a few words led to a full disclosure. The good man was deeply disheartened, but he did not despair. He would see the squire at once. Up to the Towers he went, despite all Ernest's protestations leaving the poor fellow wretched enough.

The squire would not see the vicar; for the first time in his life Bramleigh was repulsed from the doors of Tracy Towers. Much hurt, but still making allowance for the feelings of his old friend, the vicar did not give up hope. He insisted upon Ernest remaining with him. He wrote to the Bishop, detailing the discovery of the altar, and recommending Ernest for the benefice, and hinting, at the same time, his descent from the Tracys and possible alliance with them.

This was a stroke of the vicar's simple cunning. "For the bishop, save his lordship! is a worldly man (he thought). A poor curate is of no object to him. But a Tracy, allied to Tracy Towers, with all their influence, is another matter."

In three weeks Ernest received the living of Alderbury Priors, in the same county, about fifteen miles distant, yielding an income of eleven hundred, beside glebe. This revived his heart somewhat, yet he felt half ashamed to accept a living with more than his kind old friend, the vicar. At last the day came that he read himself in and took up his residence. Then, and not till Ernest had left the parish, did the squire call upon Bramleigh, and renewed their friendly relations. Gradually the good old vicar introduced the subject nearest his heart. He produced the deed, which sent the squire into an ecstasy of excitement, and declared that it was all through Ernest's ingenuity that it had been recovered. He drew forth a genealogy which he had written, showing the descendants of Matilda; finally ending in Ernest Tracy, who was not, therefore, a low-born ploughboy. He expatiated on the advance Ernest had already made. With his talents he might become a bishop himself. Finally, he hinted at the delicate state of Dora's health, which had lately given the baronet much uneasiness. But, after all, it was the deed, that turned the scale—

the triumph over Benson. The squire ploughed up the common-land and stamped about it sturdily. But to do him justice, so soon as he had got his right he turned round and gave the villagers twenty-five acres of the very best arable land for allotment-gardens free of all rent.

Ernest came to Monkbourne Vicarage one Wednesday after noon; as if by accident the squire walked in. Nothing was said about the estrangement. In the evening, as of old, Ernest and the old vicar dined at Tracy Towers.

“Even now,” said the squire, in the evening, “I don’t quite see how that deed came in that steel globe.”

“Why, undoubtedly,” said the vicar, “Matilda put it there in the endeavour, as she could not secure the inheritance of the Towers to her own son, to prevent the cousin from gaining it. But might was stronger than right in those days. The steel globe was buried with Matilda as one of her implements of necromancy—what we call magnetism.”

Ernest had stolen away to the drawing-room; Dora’s head was nestling against his shoulder. Why linger? The story is told. They were married: and thus, out of the miserable end of one poor wretched woman, there arose, three centuries afterwards, the exquisite happiness of another.



The Grave of the Last Abbot

Richard Jefferies

First published in the Wilts & Gloucestershire Standard, June 12, 1869 under the name ‘Geoffrey’.

POETRY. [Blake, the last Abbot of Cirencester, lies buried, says tradition, in the chancel of Driifield Church].

As the eve came softly stealing
O’er the churchyard, I was kneeling
In the chancel, on a slab of square blue stone;
Roughly hewn, without engraving;
No ‘hicjacet’—plain like paving;
Here they buried Blake, the abbot, long ago.
Through the lead-lined panes, bright painted
With Christ’s disciples sainted,
Came the light all strangely tainted.
On the abbot’s grave that dull dim light was thrown,
In the eve as in the daytime, still the same dull monotone.
Christ and angels o’er him gazing.
As when death his eye was glazing,

To Heaven o'erhead his glance upraising,
Saw he the First Great Martyr on His throne.

With my finger slow I traced
Holes where brasses once were braced,
By war's rude hand from out their holdings torn.
Once they told the abbot's story,
Now, save legends old and hoary,
Nought records his ancient glory,
Or tells the traveller whom he should mourn.

* * *

When the luscious grapes grew ripe,
And the apples sweet and mellow;
When the blackbird ceased his pipe,
And the leaves grew red and yellow;
As the sunset glowing o'er the valley fell:
From the ancient abbey, tolling,
Came the death-bell, full-toned, rolling,
With a heaving like a woman's sob, the abbot's passing knell.

* * *

In the twilight of the evening,
When the bats were swiftly wheeling,
And the owl sat on the forked and withered bough,
Came the monks with muffled footfall,
Cowls and cross and dusky pall,
With bowed heads, and measured pace and slow.
Candles burning, solemn chaunt they,
As the pall they roll away,
Glisten nails and plate on shell of oak;
First then forth their sorrow broke,
In a long and deep-drawn heart-felt moan;
As after storms will follow
A sighing sound all hollow,
As o'er the wreck the forest giants groan.

Cross and pall and cowed mourners
Passed away as shadows might.
When the sun arose next morning,
Proudly Day succeeded Night.
Standing on thy tomb, old abbot,
Facing east and morning's glow.
Full of thoughts of past and future
Took I there a solemn vow—
Darkness I will overthrow!

Thou art dead—aye, thou, the symbol
Of priestly craft, art dust beneath the yew;
No more trust we mass or tapers,
No more worship monk or wafers.
The keystone of thine arch is fallen through.

List, my voice like darion sounding,
Dreading neither priest nor ban,
He alone is abbot—, hero,
Who can bless his fellow man!

Geoffrey.



The Gothic Jefferies

George Miller

On 11th March 1975 Hugoe Matthews found two volumes of the *New Monthly Magazine* for 1876 in a Cirencester bookshop. The second volume contained the opening chapters of *The Rise of Maximin*, a full-length novel not known to have been published in any form and believed lost – certainly the most important Jefferies discovery since S.J. Looker. For an added bonus the first item on the contents page of volume one was an unknown story: ‘The Monkbourne Mystery, By Richard Jefferies’. My own somewhat more modest first discovery of an unrecorded Jefferies text occurred in the mid sixties. I was then going through files of the local newspapers Jefferies worked for in Swindon Public Library and came across ‘The Grave of the Last Abbot’, signed Geoffrey, the pseudonym Jefferies used for his literary and historical contributions to the *North Wilts Herald*. This was in the *Wilts and Gloucestershire Standard* of June 12 1869, the only “Geoffrey” piece there and the last of the sequence. The story and the poem might whimsically be described as Jefferies’ gothic period; the influence of Edgar Allan Poe is apparent. They are now reprinted for the first time.

The plot of ‘The Monkbourne Mystery’ is conventional. We have young lovers divided by social rank, a difficulty resolved when the low-born suitor turns out not to be low born after all. So too the characters: the irascible but good natured Squire, the worthy and mild-mannered vicar. Hugoe first described it to me as a Jefferies ghost story, but it is hardly that. Beginning on a bright May morning it doesn’t venture far into the dark. Any sense of the macabre is diffused by ponderings on scientific explanations of the supernatural, and the mystery is too soon solved. Even the fate of the immured woman is cause more of sorrow than of horror, and mitigated by the happy outcome. There are hints of Jefferies’ more usual preoccupations – the challenge to the old rural order from factory workers, the ploughing up of common land and providing allotments for village people. These give it a local feel, and the tale may owe less to Poe than to Purton, a

village to the west of Swindon where:

A bricked up woman's skeleton found contained within a hidden room is thought to be related to the ghostly form which haunts the church. Some believe the figure to be a murdered nun.¹

The Church of St Mary the Virgin (pictured below) is unusual in having a separate tower and spire – apparently the result of competing benefactors. This may have suggested the idea of the two rival churches in the story. Jefferies would certainly have visited Purton to inspect the parish registers as his *Memoir of the Goddards* has a section on the Purton branch; and for his *History of Swindon and its Environs* serialised in the *North Wilts Herald*, which contains some notes on the church.

John Blake² was the abbot of Cirencester from c1522 to 1539, when he peacefully surrendered the Abbey and its treasures to the commissioners of King Henry VIII. In 'The Grave of the Last Abbot' Jefferies is in another church, St Mary, Driffeld, contemplating an uninscribed stone said to mark the place of Abbot Blake's burial. In a faltering imitation of Poe's 'The Raven' he builds an atmosphere of sepulchral gloom with chanting monks in ghostly procession, only to dispel it with what he later (in the preface to *Round About a Great Estate*) called 'the light of the future'. It is a significant conclusion in the light of his own future: an explicit departure from orthodox faith and ritual, and perhaps too an early sign that he would grow weary of antiquities.



St. Mary's Church, Purton

¹ www.ParanormalDatabase.com. Haunted Churches and other Myths and Legends.

² In transcribing Jefferies' *History of Cirencester* Janice Lingley has found a number of references to Abbot Blake, of which the following has a direct bearing on the poem:-

"Tradition says that John Blake, the last Abbot, was buried in Driffeld Church, where a large oblong stone of a dark colour, forming part of the pavement of the chancel, is still shown as marking his grave. There is no inscription, but some holes can be traced to which brasses have been attached: said to have been torn off in the Civil Wars. There is no mention of the interment of John Blake in the registers of the church, which were kindly searched for me by the Rev. T. Maurice; but he believes them to commence from a period subsequent to the latest possible time at which the Abbot could have been buried."

William Strang: The Jefferies Portrait

Peter Robins



William Strang's etching of Richard Jefferies, 1889.

The most abiding image of Richard Jefferies is the portrait etching by William Strang, the genesis of which may lie in Jefferies' own imagination. In a letter from West Brighton of 3 November 1883 to Charles Longman,¹ who had asked Jefferies for a summary of *The Story of My Heart* for publication in the firm's house journal,² he explained that it had been impossible to do and hoped a few chosen extracts would suggest the essence of his autobiography. One of those he selected was:

I remember a cameo of Augustus Caesar – the head of the emperor is graven in delicate lines, and shows the most exquisite proportions. It is a balanced head, a head adjusted to the calmest intellect. That head when it was living contained a circle of ideas, the largest, the widest, the most profound current in his time. All that philosophy had taught, all that practice, experiment, and empiricism had discovered, was familiar to him. ...It is reasonable to imagine a head of our time filled with the largest, the widest, the most profound ideas current in the age...As we have a circle of ideas unknown to Augustus Caesar, so I argue there are whole circles of ideas unknown to us.

¹ C.J. Longman's Preface to Jefferies' *The Story of My Heart* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1894), p.viii.

² C.J. Longman *ibid* pp.ix-x. Published in *Notes on Books*, 30 November 1883.

These thoughts may have lodged in Charles Longman's mind and inspired him when he commissioned Strang's etching after Jefferies' premature death.

Charles Longman was first in touch with Jefferies in 1878, having read the 'Gamekeeper at Home' articles appearing in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, to suggest he write a book on shooting.³ He was to later tell Besant that this was 'the beginning of my friendship with this most interesting man.' Longman and Jefferies corresponded about other projects, agreed on *Red Deer*,⁴ and when Longman took on the editorship of the new *Longman's Magazine*,⁵ he invited Jefferies to contribute.⁶ When Jefferies, incapacitated by illness, applied to the Royal Literary Fund for a grant, Longman supported his request stating '...this is a most notable man.'⁷ Similarly, after Jefferies' death, Longman was involved in establishing a memorial to his author.⁸

The idea of an etching of Jefferies may have come naturally to Charles Longman for, his father, William Longman, had published collections of etchings by members of The Etching Club,⁹ and in 1877 had been co-founder of the Fine Art Society. The FSA commissioned James McNeill Whistler in 1879 to produce a series of etchings of Venice, which were exhibited and published in 1880. There is no obvious connection between Longman and Strang and Longman must have chosen Strang based on his reputation as an etcher.

Etching and engraving had emerged in the late fifteenth century, derived from designs upon metal objects by armourers and jewellers working in Germany and Italy. Coupled with Gutenberg's experiments with printing, a new art medium was developed, Durer and later, Rembrandt, being early masters. Etching and engraving are similar but in engraving slivers of metal are gouged out of a metal (usually copper) plate with a sharp tool (the burin). In etching, acid is used to eat away the copper along the lines drawn with a needle through a coating of wax. A copper plate created by either of these methods will produce a finer, more delicate, print than a wood block. Unlike engraving, which requires special skill in metal-working, etching is relatively easy to learn for an artist trained in drawing. An additional dexterity is required of aspiring engravers or etchers in that the image has to be drawn *in reverse*.¹⁰ Frederick Griggs, one of Britain's finest etchers, explained in a 1903 lecture, 'The chief difference between the quality of an etching and an engraving – a burin engraving – lay in the line itself...The bitten [i.e. etched] line is deeper and stronger

³ Hugoe Matthews & Phyllis Treitel, *The Forward Life of Richard Jefferies* (Oxford: Petton Books, 1994), p.95. Entry for 31 January 1878.

⁴ Published 10 January 1884.

⁵ First published November 1882.

⁶ 'Bits of Oak Bark' published March 1883 was the first to appear.

⁷ Hugoe Matthews & Phyllis Treitel, *op. cit.*, p.211. Entry for 2 November 1886.

⁸ Letter from Arthur Kinglake concerning a memorial for Richard Jefferies published in *Spectator*, 26 July 1890, in which Longman is described as 'an attached friend' of Jefferies. Walter Besant states in his *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1889), p.193, that Longman 'for the last eight years of Jefferies' life was one of his most constant friends'.

⁹ *Etch'd Thoughts by The Etching Club* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1844). A collection of 60 etchings; *Songs and Ballads of Shakespeare, illustrated by The Etching Club* (Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1853), 30 etchings.

¹⁰ A comprehensive study of etching can found in *The Art of Etching*, by E. S. Lumsden (Dover Publications, Inc. N.Y., 1962). First published in 1924.

than the engraved line; and as no force is necessary in drawing the needle through the thin coat of wax which protects the rest of the plate from the attack of the acid, the [etched] line is freer – freer than a pen line – freer than any other medium.¹¹

William Strang was born on 13 February 1859 in Dumbarton, on the north bank of the River Clyde. His father, Peter, was a builder and his mother, Janet, had family connections with a Clydeside ship-building firm. It was here, at fifteen, that William was found a position in the accounts department. He was unsuited to the work but his talent for drawing was spotted by a family friend who recommended he should attend art school, suggesting the newly-established Slade School of Fine Art at University College, London. His parents lacked the funds to make this possible but a wealthy aunt offered to pay the annual fee of nineteen guineas and to support William during his studies.¹²

Strang enrolled at the Slade in early 1876, initially under Professor Edward J. Poynter who left that same year to take up a position as director and principal of The National Art Training School at South Kensington. He had ensured that he was succeeded at the Slade by Alphonse Legros, who was to have a major influence on Strang's work. Legros had been encouraged to come to London from Paris in 1861 by Whistler, who admired Legros's skill in etching and, with Legros and others, wanted to encourage *original engraving*. Historically, line-engraving, etching, wood-cuts or wood engraving were regarded as useful only for interpreting – or, more frequently, falsifying – the masterpieces of the past.¹³



An etching by Alphonse Legros of Edward Poynter, 1877.

¹¹ Jerrold Northrop Moore, *F. L. Griggs (1876-1938) The Architecture of Dreams* (Antique Collectors' Club, 2008), p.17.

¹² There is no biography of William Strang, he kept no diaries and there is no cache of letters. The most comprehensive study of Strang is to be found in Philip Athill and Anne Goodchild's *William Strang RA 1859-1921* (Sheffield City Art Galleries, 1981), on which I have drawn.

¹³ Claude Roger-Marx, *Graphic Art of the 19th Century* (Thames & Hudson, 1962), p.82.

Legros soon found a living in teaching drawing and etching before being elected as Slade Professor. The etching class at the Slade was an innovation of Legros and included the techniques of printing. His influence there was to encourage a certain distinction, severity and truth of character in the work of his pupils, with a simple technique and a respect for the traditions of the old masters.¹⁴ Many of the students didn't get along with him, as Lumsden commented, 'Legros's temperament, like his technique, restricted him to the production of a certain class of work, and that only. He could never unbend and express the sheer joy of living as could Rembrandt. His outlook was often sombre; always dignified and quiet; never gay.'¹⁵ Legros painted before the students and would draw before them from the life and from the antique. Experiments in all varieties of art work were practised. Although Strang is best known for his etchings, drawings and oils, his versatility was praised by art critic Frank Newbolt in a 1907 monograph of Strang's etchings: 'The whole sum of Mr Strang's work comprises etchings on copper, zinc and pewter, engravings, mezzotints, aquatints, dry-points, woodcuts, line engravings, silver-point drawings, lithographs, coloured drawings, water-colours and oil paintings.'¹⁶

In 1880, after four years at the Slade, Strang decided to concentrate on etching and stayed on for a year to assist Legros. Although he continued to paint, etching was to dominate his work for the next twenty years. One of his first portraits was of Francis Seymour Haden, first President of The Society of Painter-Etchers, founded in 1880 in reaction to the Royal Academy's reluctance to exhibit etchings and engravings. Strang exhibited at their inaugural exhibition at the Hanover Gallery and was elected a fellow in 1881 as his reputation grew.

A facet of the Victorian era was the sense of responsibility for the condition of the poor, which haunted the minds of sensitive and educated men of the leisure classes. Strang had strong socialist leanings and his etchings of the 1880s included subjects such as 'The Tinker', 'The Sick Child', 'Head of a Peasant' and 'Mother Feeding a Child'. Another theme depicted parables from the Bible, characterised by 'The Prodigal Son', 'The Good Samaritan' and 'The Temptation of Anthony'. A number of these etchings were published in the leading print magazines of the period, *English Etchings*, *The Portfolio* and later in the decade, *The Dial*. Several of his chalk portraits appeared in *Court and Society Review*. Some of his best etchings were in series, examples from this period being his illustrations for William Nicholson's *Ballad of Aken Drum* and Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*.¹⁷

This prodigious output – he etched more than 600 plates in his lifetime – revealed his doggedness and he was recognised at the end of the 1880s as the most important young etcher of the day. A number of artists had found etching too laborious and didn't repay the effort. Samuel Palmer had found that success in the medium 'depends on delight in solitude and locked doors, a contemplative mood and intense concentration' and had to restrict his etching to intense periods between the demands of his watercolour painting, his teaching and his family life. He completed only thirteen plates during his lifetime.¹⁸

¹⁴ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1911. (online).

¹⁵ E. S. Lumsden, *op. cit.*, p.284.

¹⁶ Frank Newbolt, *Etchings of William Strang ARA* (G. Newnes Limited, 1907), pp.7-8.

¹⁷ *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1911 (online)

¹⁸ Rachel Campbell-Johnston, *Mysterious Wisdom: The Life and Works of Samuel Palmer* (Bloomsbury,

The artist Leonard Squirrel, best known for his topographical watercolours, began with etching but after 200 plates he confessed that, 'Etching is so arduous a craft, requiring so much equipment, that I relinquished it for watercolour, quicker and more dependable!'¹⁹

Strang was making his way in the world and in 1885 married Agnes McSymon Rogerson, a daughter of the provost of Dumbarton. They settled at 17 St. George's Square, Pimlico, a stone's-throw from the Thames, and had five children, Ian, David, Peter, Roy and Nancy in the first seven years of their marriage.²⁰ Ian and David became printmakers, Ian known for etchings of topographical subjects and David an accomplished printer, both of his own and his father's work. Longman's commission of Strang to etch a portrait of Jefferies would have been made some time in 1888. Longman's archives record payments made in January, 1889 to The London Stereoscopic Company of two guineas for a cabinet photograph of Jefferies and fifteen guineas to W. Strang, suggesting the work had been completed by that time.²¹ The fee for the cabinet photograph, taken 16 June 1879, appears excessive and perhaps includes an element of payment for artist's reference, as the usual price for a cabinet print was twice the cost of a carte de visite, with one studio quoting one guinea for six cabinet prints.

Strang was faced with an unusual problem. The portraits he had etched in the 1880s, including those of Francis Seymour Haden, Sir Charles Holroyd and Ernest Sichel, had all been from life. Although Strang left no record of any difficulty in executing his commission, we can compare the experience of Margaret Thomas, appointed in 1890 by the committee organising a permanent memorial, to sculpt a bust of Jefferies. Kedrun Laurie has written of Thomas's dilemma of turning the 1879 London Stereoscopic Company photograph into a three-dimensional sculpture. Laurie quotes poet and critic Edward Gosse who had recognised the difficulties for sculptors on having to rely on existing portraits, '...the living lips are not there to resolve his doubts, nor the living eyes to flash intelligence. In the absence of these it behooves him to employ all possible means to insure a moral and intellectual sympathy with his subject, and the let the soul shine through the mask of day.'²² To overcome her reliance on a photograph, Thomas consulted Jefferies' parents and widow but when finally unveiled the bust was criticised by many for its expressionless face. Some critics sympathised that Thomas had only a photograph to work from.

Strang's challenge was to bring some expression to the monochrome planes of the ten-year old photograph. In Roman portraits of the first to third centuries it was a convention to add some signs of wear and tear, such as wrinkles, to indicate the subject was a hard-working, mature leader, even though these characteristics were not present. Strang's etching added some texture to Jefferies' face and brow and his hair and beard were better

2011), p.244.

¹⁹ Josephine Walpole, *Artist of East Anglia, Leonard Squirrel RWS RE 1893-1979* (Antique Collectors' Club, 2011), p.23.

²⁰ William Ian (known as Ian), b.1886; David Rogerson Strang, b.1887; Peter Denny Strang, b. 1889; Roy Burch Strang, b.1890; Agnes McSymon Strang (known as Nancy), b.1892.

²¹ G. Miller and H. Matthews, *Richard Jefferies, A Bibliographical Study* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1993), p.537.

²² Margaret Thomas, Sculptor of the Bust of Richard Jefferies in Salisbury Cathedral by Kedrun Laurie. *The Richard Jefferies Society Journal*, No 13, 2004.

delineated by the etched lines. The cross-hatched background suggests stability and overall Jefferies appears dignified, sensitive, slightly suffering. George Miller thought ‘compared with the original, the face is more lived in, the expression more mature and self-assured.’²³ The focus is on the portrait with Jefferies’ clothing merely suggested, reminiscent of Van Dyck’s ‘unfinished’ portrait etchings.²⁴ Strang’s adherence to the teachings of Legros meant that he mainly relied for his style on the works of the old masters. Legros’ influence was deep and lasting and an example of Legros’ etching technique, reproduced here, justified the criticism Strang received for slavish fidelity to Legros.

The etching was first published in the large paper edition (royal octavo/10” x 6+1/4”) of *Field and Hedgerow*, published in early February, 1889, at 21/-. Miller and Matthews record that the frontispiece is a portrait of Jefferies from an etching on copper signed W. Strang, printed on toned handmade wove parchment paper of stout substance, tissue guarded, tipped in to face the title page. The image measuring 134mm x 97mm, the plate mark 164mm x 108mm. The frontispiece printed by W.Goulding and the volume by Spottiswoode and Co. The edition was limited to 200 copies, each copy numbered and of these only 102 were issued. The etching was used for further impressions of *Field and Hedgerow* in The Silver Library from 1890 to 1916, and for Silver Library impressions of *The Story of My Heart* from 1891 to 1910.²⁵

A full description of Strang’s etching of Jefferies was included in David Strang’s 1962 catalogue of his father’s work and describes how the portrait was worked up over four states.

153 (589) John Richard Jefferies (E.) 1889. Naturalist & author. From a contemporary portrait. Frontispiece to “Field and Hedgerow”, published by Longmans Green and Co., London (1889).

States :- 4*. 1st, signature at bottom right, background closely cross-hatched, there is a small unworked area on hair 3/4” from top margin-line & 1+7/8” from right, the area of beard 2+3/4” from top margin-line & 1+3/4” from left has very few lines on it; 2nd, that area of beard is now closely worked, a few lines added on hair where just mentioned as absent, no work in several places on head e.g. in a small area of hair 7/8” from top margin-line & 1+7/16” from right & also at 15/16” from top margin-line & a full 1+1/4” from left; 3rd, a little light engraved work added in these 2 areas, there is shading here and there on the jacket but none below near lapel or on arm pit to left; final, a little shading added in these two places.

Edition :- early states, perhaps 2 or 3 of each; final, perhaps 5 or 6 (unsigned) & a number (also unsigned) for publication.²⁶

The portrait of Jefferies appeared at the zenith of Strang’s etching career, for he won a Silver Medal for Etching at the Paris International Exhibition later that year. Whilst

²³ George Miller, ‘Discoveries III: Portraits of An Author’, *The Richard Jefferies Society* Spring Newsletter 2009.

²⁴ Frank Newbolt, *op. cit.*, p.11.

²⁵ G. Miller and H. Matthews, *op. cit.*

²⁶ David Strang, *William Strang: Catalogue of his Etchings and Engravings* (University of Glasgow, 1962). Earlier catalogues were *William Strang: Catalogue of his Etched Work*, introduced by Laurence Binyon (James MacLehose and Sons, Glasgow, 1906). Supplements published 1912 and 1923.

Strang continued with printmaking he tended to paint more from the early 1890s, exhibiting his first oil, *Solitude* (a nude figure), at the Royal Academy in 1892. Further exhibitions followed, Dresden in 1897 and Vienna in 1898, among which were a series of Arcadian nudes, landscapes and Classical figure compositions. Art critics wrestled with the dilemma of separating Strang's work from the artists who inspired him; Legros, Rembrandt, Millet, Holbein, Hals, Titian and others. Writing in *The Saturday Review*, artist, art critic and writer, D. S. MacColl, who had also studied under Legros at the Slade, called Strang a 'scholarly' artist as 'it is difficult to lay the finger anywhere and say certainly "This is Strang"'.²⁷

His Realist²⁸ etchings of this period reflect his socialist sympathies, encouraged by the growth of organised Socialism; 'The Salvation Army', 'Despair' (an impoverished woman with a child and baby), 'The Socialists' and 'Tinkers' typifying his vision. Other etchings took on a more macabre element; 'The Phantom' (the perils of chloral addiction), 'Grotesque' (an image dominated by a human skull with ram's horns, said to be based on a dream) and 'Drowned' (a corpse being dragged from a river). This dark side of Strang's imagination is impossible to analyse yet he shared a taste for the ghoulish and mysterious with Legros, who had illustrated the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe. Commissions included illustrations to Coleridge's 'The Ancient Mariner', Kipling's short stories and to Cervantes's *Don Quixote* as well as providing ten original plates to a book of technical instruction.²⁹

In 1900, Strang moved to St. John's Wood, an affluent part of north-west London popular with artists and authors, to 7 Hamilton Terrace,³⁰ an attractive Georgian house to which he added a studio in the garden.

The concentration on oils appeared to lighten his work, as if colour by itself brought a change in his mood. A series of paintings of contemporary London life included 'Bank Holiday' (now in the Tate but not currently displayed), 'The Jazz Hat', 'The Café Royalists' or 'Bal Suzette', as well as oil portraits of Lucien Pissarro and Vita Sackville-West ('Lady with a Red Hat'). Strang's oils, though dear, with bright colour and rigorous drawing, were not entirely successful and contemporary criticism suggested an emphasis on technique over artistic interpretation. Philip Athill has commented, '...he was very involved in technique, and it is in the larger works between 1910 and 1915, that his attempts to use form and colour to express the mood of the subject rather than the artist's relish at expressing that mood are most noticeable. The certain harshness of contour and larger areas of pure colour, and increased scale that began to characterise his more important exhibited works from 1910 did not affect all his work, indeed he continually reverted, especially in portraiture, to a manner he felt to be more sympathetic to his subject.'³¹

²⁷ D. S. MacColl, *The Saturday Review*, 1 Apr 1899, pp.396-7.

²⁸ Realism – an artistic agenda of the 1880s concerned with matter, physical experience and, by extension, with the political interests of the working classes.

²⁹ Hans W. Singer, *Etching, Engraving and other methods of printing pictures* with ten original plates and four illustrations after William Strang. (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd., 1897).

³⁰ Since renumbered as number 20. London County Council installed a Blue Plaque in commemoration of William Strang in 1962.

³¹ Philip Athill and Anne Goodchild, *op. cit.*

Colour also imbued his drawings when he developed a style using red and black chalk, with the whites and highlights rubbed out, on paper stained with watercolour. This produced delicate modelling and gradations akin to the work of Holbein.³² He drew many portraits in this manner of members of the Order of Merit for the royal library at Windsor. Among the sitters were Lord Kitchener, Thomas Hardy, Lawrence Alma-Tadema (another resident of St. John's Wood), and Edward Prince of Wales.

On 1 March 1921, Strang was elected as a Royal Academician Engraver, a rather late acknowledgment of his printmaking. Considering that he had been painting for the previous twenty years this was not the recognition he had hoped for or expected. He was not to enjoy his new status, however ironic, for he died suddenly of heart failure on 12 April that year, aged 62, whilst staying at the Brinklea Private Hotel in Bournemouth.³³

A Memorial Exhibition was held towards the end of the year at the Fine Art Society, still controlled by the Longman family.³⁴ Post-mortem appraisal puzzled the critics who asserted that Strang's work was too eclectic to be classified. In a contemporary review of the exhibition by Aldous Huxley in *Vogue*,³⁵ the heading 'The William Strang Memorial Exhibition' bore the remarkable subtitle, 'The Work of an Artist Whose First Desire was Always to Achieve Definition of Outline and Solidity of Form in Whatever He Did.' Huxley went on to say, 'We do not feel in looking at his pictures, that they were the product of passion controlled by intellect. Too often there seems to be no passion to be controlled and the pictures are the fruit of intellect alone. It is the weakness which impairs merit of many of his pictures.' E. S. Lumsden, echoed the observation, commenting in his 1924 book, '...some of his portraits of men are very fine indeed and genuinely personal expressions; but often his work commands one's respect while it fails to move.'³⁶

Agnes, his widow, died in 1933 and the works that remained in her possession were distributed among three sons. David printed a small edition of proofs from the plates in his ownership; the plates, nearly 600 in all, were then destroyed. In 1955 David donated a large collection of his father's etchings, in various states, to both The National Galleries of Scotland and Glasgow Museums. Fortunately, Strang's portrait of Jefferies was among both gifts. The only other original print in a public collection can be found at the British Museum. The portrait at the National Portrait Gallery is a photogravure facsimile.³⁷

In the decade that Strang died, etchings increased in popularity in an unprecedented

³² *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1911 (online).

³³ Strang is buried at Kensal Green Cemetery, London.

³⁴ Chairmen for the Fine Art Society were all drawn from the Longman family until the death of Mark Longman in 1972.

³⁵ *Vogue*, Jan, 1922. Collected in *The Aldous Huxley Annual Vol 5*. 2005, p.22. Benfried Nugel, Jerome Meckier (Eds). LIT Verlag Münster. *Vogue* magazine at this time was a blend of fashion, art and literature. Huxley's first novel, *Crome Yellow*, had been published in 1921.

³⁶ E. S. Lumsden, *op. cit.*, p.312.

³⁷ Scottish National Gallery: John Richard Jefferies; accession number P2333.224, David Strang gift, 1955. Glasgow Museum: Richard Jefferies: PR.1955.12.rj; presented by David Strang, 1955.

British Museum: John Richard Jefferies: 1953.0509.108. Donated by National Art Collections Fund (The Art Fund), 1953 (previously in the collection of David Strang).

National Portrait Gallery: Richard Jefferies: NPG D3302; photogravure given by Walter & Cockerell, 1902.

market for contemporary prints. The bubble burst following the Wall Street Crash and the economic depression of the Thirties, changes in interior design leaning to minimalism (with fewer pictures gracing walls) and a fickle art market, meant etchings were suddenly no longer popular.

It was almost sixty years after Strang's Memorial Exhibition that a re-evaluation of his work by the art establishment was considered. A retrospective exhibition of mixed work by Strang – etchings, drawings, oils -- curated by Anne Goodchild with a catalogue by Philip Athill, was held at the Graves Art Gallery, Sheffield from December 1980, transferring to Kelvingrove Art Gallery, Glasgow, and ending at the National Portrait Gallery in June 1981. Richard Shone, the art critic of the prestigious fine arts journal, *The Burlington Magazine*,³⁸ in his review of the exhibition seemed surprised that Strang had been revived, commenting, 'Although William Strang has been rather neglected since his death, it is unlikely that he has been undervalued.' Shone was dismissive of his painting daiming, 'as a painter he appears never to have found a solution to the timeless problem of how or what to paint. "Nymphs and Shepherds" (Strang's last painting), a thorough mongrel, "Bal Suzette", impressively nauseous.' Some approval was shown of Strang's etchings though these were said to 'swing between sardonic imagination and harsh acceptance of reality.' Shone also praised his portraits, observing that 'his technical hardness and his appreciation of character, came to the fore with a series of portraits of his friends and eminent sitters such as Meredith and Hardy.'

Despite the exposition, and perhaps as a result of critical indifference, Strang's work languished in limbo for a further three decades until the Scottish National Gallery devoted a small gallery to thirty key works on paper from its own collection. 'Fair Faces, Dark Places: Prints and Drawings by William Strang (1859-1921)'³⁹ displayed portraits, book illustrations and, as implied in the show's title, some of the macabre etchings, including 'Despair' and 'Grotesque'. Duncan Macmillan in his review of the exhibition in *The Scotsman*, pointed out that Strang, along with three other Scots etchers, David Young Cameron, Muirhead Bone and James McBey who together had been termed 'The Big Four', had fallen out of fashion when his contemporaries had not. Macmillan attributed this 'to the dark, fantastic side to his art and his left-wing views, or at least as they were realised in his art.'⁴⁰

Strang's Realist⁴¹ etchings, no doubt based on sincerely-held socialist beliefs, and his imaginative but chilling fantasies, perhaps encouraged by Legros, and some of his oils have, at least among art critics, persistently detracted from his reputation. Strang's continuous experimenting with style and technique meant he was too eclectic to be classified. Beauty for him 'lay in fine draughtsmanship, technical skill, sincerity and authenticity. According to Strang "there are no beauties but technical ones."⁴²

³⁸ *The Burlington Magazine*, Vol 123 No 935, Feb 1981 p.116.

³⁹ 'Fair Faces, Dark Places: William Strang (1859-1921)' ran from 18 Oct 2014 – 15 Feb 2015, at the Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh.

⁴⁰ Duncan Macmillan, *The Scotsman*, 1 Nov 2014.

⁴¹ Realism – see footnote 28.

⁴² Gallery text: 'Fair Faces, Dark Places: William Strang (1859-1921)' Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh.

Portraits were a regular feature of Strang's output and it is fortunate that Charles Longman commissioned the portrait of Jefferies at the pinnacle of Strang's etching years. We can reflect on the perceptive portrait, as Jefferies did on the cameo of Augustus Caesar, and believe that this is the face of a man who could create the journey of imagination he called *The Story of My Heart*.



Self-portrait etching by William Strang, 1895.

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The Story of *The Scarlet Shawl*

George Miller

Jefferies' first book, *The Scarlet Shawl: a Novel*, was published between the 16th and 30th of July 1874 (Publisher's Circular) by Tinsley Brothers of 8, Catherine Street, Strand, printed by Savil, Edwards and Co. of Chandos Street, Covent Garden, in a single crown 8vo volume of 320 pages including prelims. and two advert. leaves, in an edition of probably 500 copies. The retail price was 10/6.

The Tinsley brothers, William and Edward, came from a rustic background somewhat lower down the social scale than Jefferies'. Edward, who claimed to have come to London on a hay cart, had aspirations of authorship. He gave up an engineering apprenticeship to dabble in journalism and publishing. William worked on a farm before following Edward, by what means of transport is not known. He loved theatres and bookshops and managed to glean enough stock from the street barrows to open his own shop in 1854. The brothers joined forces as publishers in 1858, but when Edward died in 1866 the firm continued as Tinsley Brothers under William's sole direction.

William did not fit the template of the Victorian gentleman publisher. Self-made and self-taught, he belonged to a somewhat rakish Bohemian set that frequented the Gaiety Bar, adjoining the premises in Catherine Street. The house of Tinsley tended to be the last resort of authors who had been rejected by more prestigious firms. William's fellow feeling towards aspiring young provincials, and undoubted generosity to a host of lady writers in difficult or desperate domestic situations, often got the better of his business acumen. But it also has to be said that his perception both of popular appeal and genuine ability was more acute than many of his rivals. His role, as he ruefully admits in his memoirs, was often to bring on rising talent of which others were to reap the benefit.¹

Tinsley Brothers' biggest commercial success was M.E. Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret*, which, with subsequent Braddon titles, Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone*, early novels of Mrs Henry Wood, and Sheridan Le Fanu, associated Tinsley's good offices with the 1860's vogue of the "sensation" novel: dark tales of mystery, crime and intrigue. But the full list is far more comprehensive, including social, domestic, high life and low life, historical, romantic and realist fiction. We find the names of William Black, George Meredith, Ouida, George MacDonald, G.A. Henty, Anthony Trollope, George Moore, Henry Kingsley, Harrison Ainsworth and George Gissing with the Tinsley imprint. Indeed Walter Besant, though his *Eulogy of Richard Jefferies* severely criticises Tinsley for encouraging Jefferies to write fiction, also in his early career availed himself of his good offices. These names are interspersed with numerous listings of barely known or completely forgotten authors; and even some of whose recorded oeuvre in the *English*

¹ William Tinsley, *Random Recollections of an Old Publisher* (1900). The amusing story in George Moore's *Confessions of a Young Man* (1888) that the way to be published by Tinsley was to straddle the counter in Catherine Street and stroke the cat, retold by Malcolm Elwin in *The Essential Richard Jefferies* (1948), is of course nonsense.

Catalogue of Books not a single copy survives.

However William Tinsley will ever be remembered for one discovery. In the three years preceding *The Scarlet Shawl* he published the first three novels of a young West Country architect, with the titles *Desperate Remedies*, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, and *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. There is a curious symmetry between Tinsley's dealings with Thomas Hardy and with Jefferies. In both cases he perceived that their true strength lay in their knowledge of country life and characters and their ability to portray them vividly. The potential of the regional novel had been wonderfully demonstrated by the success of George Eliot and the Brontës, and he was anxious to find and encourage new writers with the ability and knowledge to emulate them. In his advice to authors in *Reporting; Editing and Authorship* and in his earlier pitch to Tinsley of *Only a Girl* Jefferies clearly understood this potential, but neither he nor Hardy was prepared to commit himself fully to it at the outset, and were unwisely drawn to fashionable society and sensational incident as a quicker route to popular success. Of Hardy's trio Tinsley greatly preferred *Under the Greenwood Tree*, and put all his efforts into promoting it. By the same token he must have been prepared to tolerate what he certainly would have realised were the faults and weaknesses of Jefferies' early novels for the emergence here and there of the true rural vision. Hardy records a chance meeting with Tinsley in the Strand in which Tinsley asks Hardy when he is going to submit his next novel. Hardy replies that on the basis of his returns for *Desperate Remedies* he had decided to stick to architecture as a career. The reply he records verbatim:

'Pon my soul, Mr Hardy, you wouldn't have got another man in London to print it! Oh, be hanged if you would! 'twas a blood-curdling story! Now please try to find that new manuscript and let me see it.'²

Tinsley might also have encouraged Jefferies at a similar low point, when his next novel, *Restless Human Hearts*, failed to make any headway. *World's End* that followed marked a considerable advance. If he was indeed influential in persuading both these young authors to try again, influence in literary matters has rarely been more crucial.

Tinsley's and many other publishers' records were destroyed in the London blitz. In any case he was not given to written agreements, an exchange of letters or a handshake being considered an adequate endorsement of any arrangement. This has laid him open to criticism, especially in his dealings with Hardy. But J.A. Sutherland defends him, and his account of the transaction may be taken as a pattern for Tinsley's dealings with Jefferies:

The terms of agreement for *Desperate Remedies* were simple enough. Hardy had a half-profits contract and an edition of 500 three-volume copies was planned for. This was the usual arrangement for the first novel by an untied author. What was slightly unusual was that Hardy advanced £75 to the publisher as a 'guarantee'. This would be repaid to the novelist out of net profits if there were any. In fact Hardy never recovered the money. Tinsley calculated that the 372 copies sold yielded a half share of only £60 after expenses, leaving the novelist £15 out of pocket on his first published work.³

² Florence Hardy, *The Life of Thomas Hardy, 1840-1928* (London: Macmillan, 1962), p.88.

³ J.A. Sutherland, *Victorian Novelists and Publishers* (Atheone Press, 1976), p.157.

Sutherland explains that the half-profit system was open to abuse by publishers who exaggerated their expenses, but Peter Newbolt quotes testimony to Tinsley's honesty in such matters, and evidence of the meticulous methods of his part-time accountant, William Croft.⁴

Jefferies complained to William Hepworth Dixon in a letter dated February 4th [1876]:

I wrote a one volume novel which several publishers said was good but refused to take on the grounds that I was an unknown writer. Finally I gave Mssrs. Tinsley Bros. £50 to publish it – they did and admitted that 200 copies were sold, and yet refused to give me 1/- or make the slightest return. I wrote a second novel in 3 vols. which they also published (at their own cost) but refused to give me anything. I think that in my ignorance of the trade I was thoroughly well cheated.⁵

Comparing this situation with the £1-10s he gets per page for magazine articles he asks Dixon if he can give him an introduction to another publisher, or any other advice, regarding his third novel, on which he has spent “an immense deal of time and trouble”. The fact that *World's End* also went to Tinsley suggests the advice he got was unhelpful – or realistic. A novel would have to sell in thousands rather than hundreds, regardless of the publisher, to yield a return, and that, for a really successful novel, could also be in thousands. Then as now writing fiction was a speculative affair.

Most of the first issue of *The Scarlet Shawl* (probably the 200 Tinsley admitted selling) was sold at a discount to W.H. Smith and Son's circulating library. These copies are in purplish red sand grained cloth with an ornate border stamped in black on the front and repeated in blind on the back, with title, author, publisher, borders and ornaments all in gold on the spine. The second issue, appearing in the spring of 1875, is in red diagonal ribbed cloth, a black stamped border of plain rules and inner frame with rounded corners and repeated florets on both covers; the spine has gold and black rules, gold lettering and black ornament. Thomas Hardy recorded: “Never will I forget the thrill that ran through me from head to foot when I held my first copy of *Desperate Remedies* in my hand.”⁶ But this pleasure was spoilt for Jefferies by an embarrassing typo (a missing “G” in “TRAINING”) in the effusive dedication to Aunt Ellen. Tinsley was notably casual in the editing and proof reading departments. Jefferies must have complained about this, and also the unwelcome insertion of a leaf of Tinsley adverts. at the front of the book, as in the second issue a corrected cancel replaces the original dedication leaf and both leaves of adverts. are at the back. But this version has an even more conspicuous error in the misspelling “JEFFRIES” on the spine. The existence of a copies in the British Library and University of Toronto Library on which the original lettering has been erased and the author's name, correctly spelt, crudely superimposed in the same type face, no doubt indicates another strongly worded letter from author to publisher. It is possibly these faults that explain the non-appearance to date of any copy inscribed by the author.

A part, and perhaps the greater part, of the first issue, judging by survival rates, was remaindered. These copies have trimmed edges and come in green, blue and terra cotta

⁴ Peter Newbolt, *William Tinsley (1831-1902) “Speculative Publisher”*, 2001, p.160.

⁵ ALS from 22 Victoria Road, Swindon. William Hepworth Dixon (1821-75) was an author, scholar, historian, traveller, and editor of *The Athenaeum* from 1853 to 1869.

⁶ *ibid.* Quoted p.160.

shades of dot-and-ribbon doth decorated with black and blind rules and ornaments, the title and author's surname in gold on the spine but no publisher. The integral uncorrected dedication leaf is present, sometimes resulting in wrong description as first issue copies, and there are no adverts. Despite having to sell off unbound sheets of the first print run Tinsley ordered a second in 1877. *The Publisher's Circular* gives the date as 16-30 August. Besant comments: "As the work is stated on the title page to have advanced to a second edition, one of two things is certain – namely either the book appealed to a large number of readers, or the editions were very small indeed. I incline, myself, to the latter opinion."⁷ He is doubtless referring to the undated "new edition" (the terms "edition" and "impression" were not clearly differentiated) as no "second edition" is known. According to Jefferies, however, no less than 5000 copies of this second impression were printed, making it the largest single print run of any title published in his lifetime. The claim is made in a note on the MS of *The Deny Morn*, published by Bentley in 1884, perhaps in response to a query by George Bentley regarding sales of previous titles.⁸

However fewer copies of the second even than the first impression have come into view. Of these known copies, printed without the half title and dedication, two are in green doth, decorated in black with gold lettering, and no signs of library use. They would correspond with Tinsley's Six Shilling Series, "handsomely bound in doth". Four are in "illustrated wrappers", known as yellowbacks, with a 3-colour illustration on the front cover showing a richly furnished interior with two distressed ladies and a dark suited man, kneeling with out-held letter (Nora, Rachel and Stanley⁹); red drapes in the foreground (see illustration on p.32). The price on the spine is one shilling, and the caption of the back cover reads "To be had in every Railway Stall and of every bookshop in the Kingdom." The cheapness and availability goes some way to explain the 5000. With type still standing it would have been relatively inexpensive to print a considerable run, and the melodramatic title and lurid cover might well have sold it to weary and unsuspecting travellers.

It should also be noted that survival rates are no sure guide to print runs, and Michael Sadleir observes that the Tinsley books were more ephemeral than others. The adverts in the second impression include four pages listing "Mr. Farjeon's Works". Benjamin Leopold Farjeon emigrated to the antipodes and abandoned a successful career there to travel back to England and meet his hero, Charles Dickens. Tipped as Dickens's successor he was immensely popular and prolific, and the first print run alone of *Blade o' Grass* was 20,000. Yet a search at the time of writing on the worldwide internet reveals only a single copy of a Farjeon title with the Tinsley imprint for sale.

But it would seem that even the railway bookstalls struggled to dispose of 5000 1/- copies and an unusual, possibly even unprecedented, device was resorted to. Copies of the second impression have turned up paired with another title, *The Female Nihilist* by Ernest Lavigne, translated from the French by G. Sutherland Edwards, published by W.H. Allen & Co. of 13 Waterloo Place, 1880. Three copies have been examined, in red,

⁷ Walter Besant, *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1888), p.147.

⁸ Miller and Matthews, *Richard Jefferies: a Bibliographical Study* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1993), D4.

⁹ I am grateful to W.J. Keith for pointing out the erroneous identification of the dark suited man as Percival in the Bibliography.

blue and green publisher's cloth with decorated covers and full gilt spines. Another pairing has been reported with *Fond or Faithful?* by Richard Fitzgerald, published by Remington in 1882. A further copy separated from its companion could have been attached to one of these or to another title. The spines give the titles, the caption "Two thrilling novels", price 21/-, and London at the foot. The conjunction of two quite disparate works from different publishers would seem to indicate a third party in the shape of a remainder merchant. 21/- is the full price for two volumes but Carter¹⁰ states that remainders often had the original price on the spine as a sales ploy to contrast with the actual price on the fly-leaf inside – making this an early example perhaps of "two for the price of one". But the binding is the full specification for a first printing compared with the typical pared down remainder version, and Tinsley's adverts are still present with *The Scarlet Shawl*.

The reviews of *The Scarlet Shawl* would not have made up for Jefferies' disappointment with the book itself. "Beyond the rather rhapsodical style in which this slight story is spun out to the dimensions of a novel, there is little remarkable about it... Neither of the principle parties manages to arouse our interest, and the manners and morals of the whole company are of a common description." This from *The Athenaeum*. *The Examiner* again found it "a slight story", but "jauntily told", and summarises the plot in a jauntily dismissive way, in particular the chapter "describing, in the most luscious flowers of rhetoric, the effects of a scarlet shawl on modern society." *The Graphic* offers a little comfort: "The tale is not too long, and by no means dull, or without some power in character drawing, but against these merits must be set the fact that in places it is slightly – perhaps more than slightly – vulgar, and that the 'fastness' of the heroine is made unpleasantly conspicuous. It must however be said that these characteristics diminish as the story proceeds." This reviewer also notes Jefferies' "curious theory about a scarlet shawl" and thinks him "too susceptible for his own peace of mind." *The Westminster Review* also finds "power", but again this is qualified: "... the author shows a power for describing characteristics. Some of his touches are very happy. But then he goes no further. All is surface."

None of these, however, go as far as Besant, who condemned the novel as a "worthless book" with "not the least touch of promise or power". Jefferies "knew nothing of society, nothing of men and women, except the people of a small country town." He "could never have been a successful novelist."¹¹ In fact Jefferies spent a good part of his childhood and youth in London, where his relatives, the Harrilds, Gydes, Lucketts and Baxters were artists, printers, inventors, entrepreneurs: people who went to concerts, exhibitions and the theatre and lived in a world of books. In letters to his aunt Ellen he complains about the dullness of country life compared with the delights of Shanklin Villa in Sydenham, and excursions to the Crystal Palace, Lewes, the Hastings Regatta, and most exciting of all a trip to the Continent. Much of this material went into *The Scarlet Shawl*, though it has to be said there is nothing in the novel as fresh and vibrant as the description of Brussels and its people in his letter to his aunt from the Hotel de

¹⁰ John Carter, *Victorian Fiction: an Exhibition...* (National Book League and C.U.P., 1947).

¹¹ Besant, *op. cit.* pp. 149-150.

l'Europe of September 22 1870.¹² The book was certainly dulled by an attempt to emulate the conventions of the society novel, with its ennobled characters and tone of worldly cynicism.

The great majority of later commentators have followed Besant in their dismissive treatment of Jefferies' first book. The view, however, that Jefferies' early novels do in fact contain evidence of his genius, despite their many and obvious faults, is not entirely unknown among his critics. Edward Thomas found that the writing "has an emotional exuberance, even when it falls into fatuity" and observed that Jefferies "was seeking to satisfy a need for another life than was being lived around him", and that he "satisfied part of his hunger for beauty by painting this alien life and indulging in these coloured images."¹³ Looker and Porteous note a fine description of the downs.¹⁴ Roger Ebbatson signals moments when the characters are alive to their inner beings in harmony with nature.¹⁵ Andrew Rossabi's study of this and the other early novels represents by far the most thorough and perceptive analysis of their strengths and weaknesses.¹⁶

The story of Jefferies, Tinsley and *The Scarlet Shawl* has a rather ironic and pathetic codicil. After nurturing Hardy and Jefferies Tinsley lost both of them to Smith, Elder & Co. "It was Smith's usual tactic," Sutherland observes, "using his money to buy property that was coming up in the world."¹⁷ In 1878 and 1879 Jefferies published *The Gamekeeper at Home* and *The Amateur Poacher*, books which Tinsley, a gamekeeper's son with many tales of his own of poachers' tricks and their fights with keepers, would have delighted to put his name to. But 1878 was the year that Tinsley first became bankrupt. With the help of his faithful accountant Croft he managed to weather the storm. In 1884 he was again unable to meet his debts, and yet somehow again managed to hold on. Jefferies died in 1887 before fulfilling the potential to succeed as a novelist that Tinsley saw in him, and the same year marked the final demise of the firm of Tinsley Brothers.

We know that during Jefferies' lifetime *The Scarlet Shawl* was still in circulation up to 1882, when it appeared in a double volume with *Fond or Faithful?* But it is likely to have been reissued in one form or another for several years after that. In fact a copy is noted which can be dated from as late as 1892. It is trimmed down to almost foolscap 8vo (or octavo) size—6¾ x 4¼ inches—in a very plain edition binding with only the title between rules gilt on the spine. The spine on this copy was detached, revealing the glued backstrip, as usual cut from printer's waste, which lists legal titles dated 1891 and 1892. The book has the bookplate of C.J. Longman, Jefferies' publisher and friend, who at that time was collecting unpublished material for *Longman's Magazine*. This too carries the date 1891. No doubt this sad little volume owes its existence to the discovery and sale of a few remaining unbound quires of the *The Scarlet Shawl* in the final clearance of Tinsley's premises. Their retention would tend to support Tinsley's claim, in his defence against Besant, that he genuinely believed in Jefferies' eventual success as a novelist.

¹² Richard Jefferies, *Letters to Aunt Ellen* (Faringdon: Petton Books, 2009).

¹³ Edward Thomas, *Richard Jefferies: His Life and Work* (London: Hutchinson, 1909), pp. 94-96.

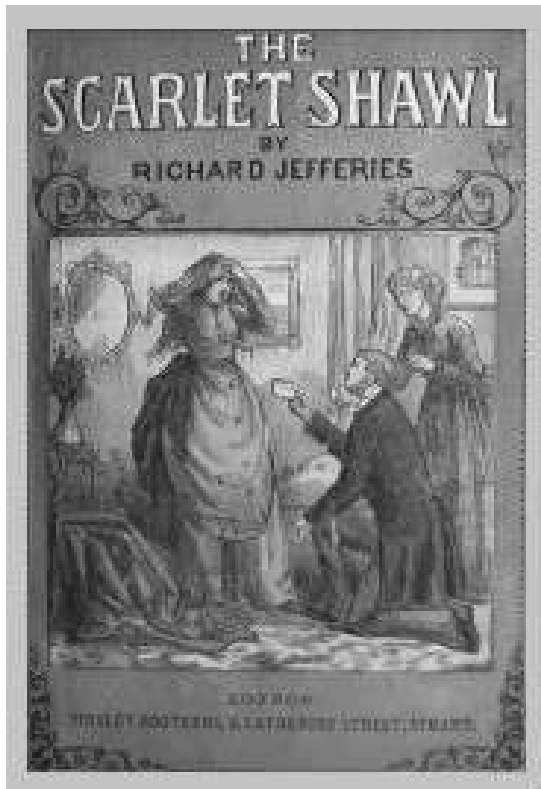
¹⁴ S.J. Looker and C. Porteous, *Richard Jefferies, Man of the Fields* (London: John Baker, 1965), pp. 99-100.

¹⁵ Roger Ebbatson, *Lawrence and the Nature Tradition*, (Harvester/Humanities, 1980), pp. 139-140.

¹⁶ Richard Jefferies, *The Scarlet Shawl*, introduction by Andrew Rossabi (Faringdon: Petton Books, 2009).

¹⁷ Sutherland, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

In view of the general chorus of disapproval it is hardly surprising that many years elapsed before another edition of Jefferies' first book appeared. In fact it took over a century. In 1996 Ariel Books of 25 Nassington Road, London brought out a new edition in hardback (ISBN 1 900073 10 2) with the introductory study by Rossabi mentioned above. Growing interest and curiosity about Jefferies' early work has made this too a scarce book, and the need for more copies was met in 2009 by the Richard Jefferies Society, publishing under the imprint Petton Books (ISBN 978-0-9522813-7-5). This is a paperback using the yellowback cover illustration (reproduced below) and the original printers' ornaments in the text. It has a revised version of Rossabi's introduction.



Richard Jefferies, the Sensation Novel, and George Gissing's *New Grub Street*

Andrew Rossabi

The 1860s saw a new literary phenomenon: the so-called 'sensation novel'.

Its appearance was bound up with economic factors. The initial publication of novels as serials in periodicals encouraged writers to close each instalment with a curtain fall or cliffhanger.¹ But it was more than a matter of plot-driven fiction (of which Wilkie Collins was the recognised master) based on intrigue, mystery, guilty secrets and improbable coincidences. The reading of novels increasingly became a form of escapism rather than means of imbibing a moral lesson. The trend became accentuated as work became more mechanical with the spread of the factory system and the counting house, and capital became the dominant force in society. The wealthy enjoyed more leisure: women especially had time to be bored.

Again, the circulating library system² put fiction within reach of the ordinary public, to whom it had previously been inaccessible because of the prohibitive price (31s 6d) of the three-volume novel or 'three-decker'. New production methods, in particular an advance in ink-rolling technique,³ made cheap books profitable, and publishers such as Bentley issued one-volume novels at 6/- each. In 1848 W.H. Smith secured the right to sell novels and papers at railway-station bookstalls. A decade later he launched his famous 'yellow-backs,' and other publishers followed suit with one-shilling novels.

In the 1850s and 1860s fiction began to make a crude assault on the emotions of the reader. Cheap serial publication encouraged casual reading habits in the public, which divided into high-, middle- and low-brow. Many saw the flood of cheap literature as a threat to the moral fabric of society, and articles appeared in reviews complaining of the pernicious effects of the so-called sensation novel.

The label derived from the contemporary theatre's 'sensation drama'. The genre fused a number of popular forms: the Gothic novel of Mrs Radcliffe, 'Monk' Lewis, and Horace Walpole, satirised by Jane Austen in *Northanger Abbey*;⁴ the melodrama; the 'Newgate' tales of crime and villainy; broadsheet literature; newspaper reports of trials and divorce cases. The sensation novel featured 'demonic females, doubles, forbidden desires, subterranean spaces—all packaged together in an exciting narrative'.⁵ It differed

¹ As in the *Dick Barton* radio serial of the writer's boyhood.

² Mudie opened his Bloomsbury house in 1842.

³ In which the firm of Harrild played a notable part by introducing the composition roller.

⁴ In *Ben Tibbs Adventures* Ben reads a Gothic novel while staying with his mother at the Saracen inn, where he 'sat up to a late hour reading a musty old novel which he had found. It was a tragic tale full of ghosts and mysterious rhymes, trap doors, dank dungeons, secret passages, awful tortures and Heaven knows what else.' (Norfolk: Petton Books, 2015, p.21).

⁵ For the history of the sensation novel I am indebted to the General Introduction to *Sensationalism and the Sensation Debate*, Edited by Andrew Maunder, Volume 1 of *Varieties of Women's Sensation Fiction: 1855-*

from the Gothic in setting crime or horror against a quotidian background. It brought murder, adultery, bigamy, illegitimacy, madness and sexual deviance into the drawing room. Blackmail, kidnapping, impersonation, abduction and fraud were other common themes. Inconvenient wives were locked away, surplus husbands dropped down wells or otherwise disposed of. Violence or its possibility was always lurking in the wings.

Apologists for the sensation novel complacently pointed to the melodramatic plots of *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*.

The most famous examples were Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1861), Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861) and Mary Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862). Prototypes of the genre, they were huge bestsellers and sparked a new fashion in writing. They also provoked a critical furor. In an address of November 1864 the Archbishop of York condemned them for glamorising crime rather than teaching moral lessons.⁶ One of the most influential and powerful critiques was written by Henry Mansel, Professor-Fellow of St John's College, Oxford.⁷

Mansel said sensation novels aimed at exciting the nerves of the reader. They belonged to the morbid phenomena of literature and were symptomatic of a widespread corruption in society, of which they were both effect and cause. They were governed solely by the laws of supply and demand:

A commercial atmosphere floats around works of this class, redolent of the manufactory and the shop. The public want novels, and novels must be made—so many yards of printed stuff, sensation-pattern, to be ready by the beginning of the season.⁸

The phenomenon had three main causes: periodicals, circulating libraries, and railway bookstalls. Periodicals were ephemeral, disposable, and the tales they carried likewise. The stories then appeared reprinted in volume form for the circulating libraries, the chief hot-bed for forcing 'writers without talent and readers without discrimination'.⁹ The novels were to literature what *magasins de mode* were to dress. The phrase 'books of the season' said it all.

The buyer of books was careful about what he selected; the subscriber was content to pick out the title that promised amusement or excitement.

The railway-stall wares consisted partly of books written for its use, partly of cheap reprints with gaudy cover, small print, coarse paper, and sensation picture 'hung out like a signboard'.¹⁰ Railway passengers were hurried, with no time to examine the merits of a book before purchase. The bookstalls, like the refreshment-rooms, offered 'something

1890. General Editor: Andrew Maunder (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2004), where the above quote appears on p.xi.

⁶ 'Just as all American publishers hope that if they are good and lead upright lives, their books will be banned in Boston, so do all English publishers pray that theirs will be denounced from the pulpit by a bishop. Full statistics are not to hand, but it is estimated by competent judges that a good bishop, denouncing from the pulpit with the right organ note in his voice, can add between ten and fifteen thousand to the sales.' (P.G. Wodehouse, *Cocktail Time* [1958] (London: Arrow Books, 2008), p.31)

⁷ [Henry Mansel] 'Sensation Novels', *Quarterly Review*, 113 (April 1863), pp.481-514. Mansel's article is reprinted in Maunder (ed.), pp.32-56.

⁸ Mansel, in Maunder (ed.), p.33.

⁹ *ibid.*, p.34.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p.35.

hot and strong'.¹¹ In short, the quality of the goods was determined by the circumstances of their production. Again, the novels had to be read by numerous people.

The sensation novel abounded in incident. All the higher features of literary art were a hindrance rather than a help to works of this kind. Most were written either for amusement or with a didactic purpose. The latter were by far the worst. Charles Dickens was an offender in this line:

He never sinks so nearly to the level of the ordinary sensation novelist as when he is writing 'with purpose'.¹²

Sometimes the plot was based on an actual incident. The most popular fictional crime was bigamy. Wicked women were another common feature, whether fast young ladies or beautiful fiends.

Mansel briefly summarised twenty-four sensation novels of various types to conclude that they were a great fact in the literature of the day, of disagreeable significance, and not favourable as symptom of the condition of the body of so dety.

Similar concerns were expressed elsewhere.¹³

*

The sensation-novel debate of the 1860s is relevant because in his early fiction, both the tales which appeared in the *North Wilts Herald* in 1866-7 and the trio of novels published by Tinsley Brothers in the mid-1870s, Jefferies was clearly trying to conform to the pattern of sensation fiction, or at least incorporate many of its features (melodramatic plots, a fascination with crime, silver-fork characters, fast or dangerous women).¹⁴

Critics particularly complained of the way in which the sensation novel depicted women,¹⁵ who did not conform to the stereotype of the meek, compliant, virtuous

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² *ibid.*, p.38.

¹³ The most important articles are collected in Maunder (ed.).

¹⁴ No novel by Jefferies appears in Maunder's extensive bibliography (pp.279-392), which lists over 1000 specimens of the genre, including novels by Dickens and George Eliot (*Felix Holt*). This reflects the fact that mainstream literary critics are simply unaware of his work, especially his early fiction.

¹⁵ Sensation novels raised the question of women's liberation. Critics (mainly but not always men) accused the novels of encouraging women to behave rebelliously by inculcating values contrary to those of family and church. The novels undermined the sanitized image of the weak, passive and angelic heroine. They presented women overwhelmed by their sexuality or ready to use their bodies to obtain their ends.

Women have led the reappraisal of the sensation novel. Feminists have latched onto the fact that many of the successful authors were women, who set the literary tone of the day. The big guns were Mary Braddon, Mrs Henry Wood, 'Ouida', Annie Thomas, Florence Marryat, and Rhoda Broughton.

In his *Reporting, Editing & Authorship* manual published in 1873 Jefferies referred to Mrs Braddon and Mrs Wood. He was clearly aware of the state of the fiction market. On 19 February that year he wrote to Richard Bentley & Son, asking on what terms they would publish his novel 'Only a Girl'. By saying the heroine was 'entirely unconventional, & determined to follow the impulse of her own nature', he hinted that she was an example of the New Woman. He pointedly likened his novel in extent to Rhoda Broughton's bestselling *Come up as a Flower*, published in Bentley's six-shilling series and attacked by critics for its eroticism. Broughton was dubbed 'Queen of the Circulating Libraries'; had a mountain (Mount Rhoda) named in her honour by the captain of *HMS Alert* because he and his crew had enjoyed her novels so much during their long sea voyage; and counted even W.E. Gladstone among her admirers.

In sum, by the end of the century it was the women writers who were calling the shots. Wilkie Collins enviously reported that Mrs Wood's income from the sale of her novels in Six Shilling editions averaged

Victorian heroine. Instead, they had impulsive, stormy, wayward natures. They were Cleopatras, sirens leading their poor hapless male victims to doom and destruction. They were often violent: Aurora Floyd, eponymous heroine of Mary Braddon's sequel to *Lady Audley's Secret*, cruelly whipped her stable-boy for maltreating her dog.

The *Spectator* gave a lively profile of the type:

No novel is now complete, and very few novels are successful, without a specimen of a bad woman of a peculiar kind, hard as steel and as glittering, full of ability, insensible to fear, with the energy of a brigand and a brigand's recklessness of principle. Usually they have some one master passion,—love, or ambition, or the crave for luxury; invariably they are exempt from weakness, and purposelessness, and sensibility to small external influences which novelists once thought essential to the delineation of the sex. Nine times out of ten they have odd physical peculiarities, green eyes or violet eyes, or yellow hair, or sinuous figures, or eerie laughs, or unchanging pallor, and these peculiarities help to enslave the victims whom *prima facie* one would expect them to repel. They are in fact human tigresses...¹⁶

Reviewing three contemporary novels that featured tigress women, the writer concluded: 'Such a woman sells any book'.¹⁷

An article in the *Saturday Review* resumed the theme of the deadlier-than-the-male *femme fatale*. The novelists of the day were going in for crime of every description 'from murder downwards'.¹⁸ The lovely murderess wore Balmoral boots.¹⁹ Crime and crinoline went hand-in-hand. Murders were committed casually, served up at a picnic along with cold pigeon pie. When Marian stopped to pick a wild rose from a hedge she was in reality stabbing Reginald and burying his body in a ditch. Such novels were not from female pens only but on the whole women did the homicidal heroine better.

Several women in Jefferies' early fiction conform to the mould: Nora (fast and flirty) and Pauline Vietri (a siren with naughty Italian name) in *The Scarlet Shawl*, and Carlotta in *Restless Human Hearts*, a vamp drawn with verve and *chutzpah*. She is beautiful, ruthless, amoral, a cross-dressing dominatrix who brandishes a cane and flaunts her full white breasts. When roused she's all flashing eyes, heaving bosom and raking claws. Jefferies speaks of her 'latent *pantherism*', and compares her to a serpent with 'an indefinable *horror*, as it were, hovering over her'.²⁰ Her comeuppance aptly results from a dose encounter

£1000 per annum.

Again, in recent years there has been increased interest in the conditions of the literary marketplace, in the nuts and bolts of writing, reading and publishing. Maunder notes that 'for most of these women writing was a form of labour, ... publishing their books was a business and... the shape of their novels was marked by these material facts.' (xxii)

In an unsigned article 'Peculiarities of Some Female Novelists' (*Pall Mall Gazette*, 13 January 1870, p.8) the women novelists were likened to prostitutes or vulgar circus performers, and their rapid production equated with promiscuity.

¹⁶ 'Tigresses in Literature,' *Spectator* (10 March 1866), pp.274-5, reprinted in Maunder (ed.), pp.140-44, where the above quotation appears on p.140-1.

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p.142,

¹⁸ 'Homicidal Heroines,' *Saturday Review* (7 April 1866), pp.403-5, reprinted in Maunder (ed.), pp.145-150, where the above quotation appears on p.145.

¹⁹ A heavy laced walking shoe, named after Balmoral Castle.

²⁰ *Restless Human Hearts* [1875] (Faringdon: Petton Books, 2008), p.94.

with a cobra di capella in a railway-carriage.

*

Such was the context in which Jefferies wrote his early fiction, such the readership to which he sought to appeal. His aunt acted as a restraining influence, as did his native sense of seemliness and propriety. At the same time he was anxious, almost desperate, to make his name as a novelist. Thus at this stage in his career he was a divided self, pulled him in contrary directions.

At this point we turn to George Gissing's novel *New Grub Street* (1891), which presents an unflinching and often bitterly satirical picture of the London literary scene in the 1880s from the viewpoints of novelist, journalist and magazine editor, and their respective families. The novel dramatizes the rival claims of art and commerce, between which the writer had increasingly to choose as publishing became more commercialised. The novel helps towards an understanding of why Jefferies' early fiction took the form it did.

Gissing and Jefferies had points in common, though they never met. Both came from unconventional backgrounds, and were to an extent literary outsiders. Q.D. Leavis's article on Gissing in *Scrutiny*²¹ appeared in the issue after her piece on Jefferies, suggesting the two authors were bracketed together in her mind, perhaps because she felt they were unjustly neglected.

Their health was indifferent to poor, and both died young (Jefferies aged 38, Gissing aged 46). Both were lovers of the classics, in which Gissing had received an excellent training at Owen's College, Manchester. He was undoubtedly a finer scholar than Jefferies, who would have been hard put to join in the discussion of Sophoclean choric metres engaged in by Edwin Reardon and his friend Biffin in *New Grub Street*.²² Both were nature lovers. Jefferies' reputation largely rests on his nature writings. Gissing's work shows much sensitivity to the beauty of the natural world, of which the dearest evidence is found in his Epicurean novel of retreat and seclusion, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903).

There were differences. Gissing admired Dickens, of whom he wrote a concise and still valuable critical study.²³ In his early novel *Restless Human Hearts* Jefferies took Dickens as exemplar of the verbiage he deemed characteristic of the age.²⁴

In his chapter on Dickens's style Gissing qualified general praise by stating that the gravest of his faults was his habit of writing metrically, 'a fault which offends the prime law of prose composition'.²⁵ Dickens was not alone. Charles Kingsley exhibited the fault

²¹ Q.D. Leavis, 'Gissing and the English Novel,' *Scrutiny*, VII, June 1938, pp.73-81.

²² George Gissing, *New Grub Street*, Edited with an introduction by Bernard Bergonzi, The Penguin English Library [1968] (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1978), p.172. 'He [Gissing] was a classicist all his life, and... it must have seemed to him and to all who knew him at Owen's College that he was destined for a distinguished career as a classical scholar' (Walter Allen, introduction to the Everyman Library edition of Gissing's *The Nether World* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1975), p.vi).

²³ Gissing, *Charles Dickens, A Critical Study* (London: Blackie & Son, 1898), p.184. Q.D. Leavis (p.73) called it 'the best existing critical introduction to Dickens'.

²⁴ *Restless Human Hearts*, p.6. A note-book entry reads: 'Dickens made whole books of coarse repellent characters, and is to me unreadable.' (*The Nature Diaries and Note-Books of Richard Jefferies*, edited with an introduction and notes by Samuel J. Looker (London: Grey Walls Press Ltd, 1948), p.206)

²⁵ Gissing, *ibid*.

‘very badly’, especially in *The Heroes*. So did Jefferies in his paper ‘Beauty in the Country’, collected in *The Open Air* (1885). Gissing invited the reader to turn up the essay, where he would find:

several pages written, with very few breaks, precisely in a metre made familiar by Longfellow. As thus: ‘All the devious brooklet’s sweetness/ where the iris stays the sunlight/ all the wild woods hold of beauty:/ all the broad hills’ thyme and freedom:/ thrice a hundred years repeated’.

Gissing continued:

This, of course, betrays an ear untrained in the harmonies of prose; the worst of it is, that many readers would discover it with delight, and point to it as admirable.²⁶

If Gissing exaggerates when he speaks of ‘several pages’ written in the metre of ‘Hiawatha’, his criticism is acute, not least because (whether he knew it or not) Longfellow was a favourite poet of Jefferies, who quoted two stanzas from ‘The Secret of the Sea’ in *Beris*.

Edward Thomas, too, remarked on Jefferies’ want of a fine ear, but believed his style generally came right:

There are styles more majestic, more persuasive, more bewildering, but none which so rapidly convinces the reader of its source in the heart of one of the sincerest of men. Sometimes it is slipshod— in sound often so, for he had not a fine ear. It comes right, as a rule, by force of true vision and sincerity.²⁷

Thomas had earlier described Jefferies’ style in precise yet poetic terms that could not be bettered:

He had... by the constant necessity of moulding language to fit a more and more subtle subject-matter, become the master—the still rather uncertain master—of an easy, delicate, often sweet and, without extravagance, luxuriant style. It was not, I think, developed by much conscious effort, but grew to his use like the handle of a walking-stick. It is at times grossly careless in construction and in sound, probably because he often wrote in haste or in an uneasy state. But, given an entirely suitable subject, he wrote with a natural fineness and richness and a carelessness, too, like the blackbird’s singing. He rises and falls with his subject more than most writers, for his style was not a garment in which he clothed everything indiscriminately.²⁸

Jefferies indeed was the master of an easy, flowing, graceful and effortless style of the type the ancient grammarians termed ‘running’. Gissing’s own was more finely cadenced, more disciplined, polished and mandarin. Certain scenes in *New Grub Street*, for example the pointed exchanges between Jasper Milvain and Amy Reardon in Chapter 36, are worthy of Jane Austen. Yule’s discourses in particular are masterly: Gissing has perfectly caught the diction, pitch and sentence rhythms of the weary, battered man of letters.

Here lies the chief difference between the two. Gissing was the urbane littérateur to his fingertips. Like Yule he was a dweller ‘in the valley of the shadow of books’.²⁹ This

²⁶ *ibid.*, p.186.

²⁷ Thomas, pp.298-9.

²⁸ *ibid.*, pp.163-4.

²⁹ Gissing, *New Grub Street*, p.46.

Jefferies never became. A journalist first and last, reserved by temperament, happiest in his own company, he remained on the margins of the literary world. He read widely, but was not bookish. In *The Story of My Heart* he contrasts the vanity of reading with the feelings that came to him from nature, from the running water of brook or spring, which brought him a sense of rest, of returning to himself:

Sometimes I came from the Reading-room, where under the dome I often looked up from the desk and realised the crushing hopelessness of books, useless, not equal to one bubble borne along on the running brook I had walked by, giving no thought like the spring when I lifted the water in my hand and saw the light gleam on it.³⁰

In 'The Pigeons at the British Museum' he returned to the theme, contrasting the air, light, sun and green grass in the forecourt with the incessant mental labour that went on under the dome of the Reading-room, where the air was stagnant and the light dead.

Deeper thought and inspiration quit the heart, for they can only exist where the light vibrates and communicates its tone to the soul. If any imagine they shall find thought in many books, certainly they will be disappointed. Thought dwells by the stream and sea, by the hill and in the woodland, in the sunlight and free wind, where the wild dove haunts.³¹

He questioned the value of book-learning. In two thousand years mankind had found little to add to the basic store of knowledge gathered at the beginning of our era. The original grains of true thought had been found out of doors, in the open air and sunlight. All that had happened since had been a 'continual threshing' which had 'widened out the heap of straw and spread it abroad', but it was empty.³²

Standing outside under the portico of the Museum, Jefferies found relief: 'There is rest in gazing at the sky: a sense that wisdom does exist and may be found, a hope returns that was taken away among the books.'³³

In *New Grub Street* Marian Yule carries out research for her father in the Reading-room. Mentally exhausted one November day, she experiences a negative epiphany that brings her (and Gissing) close to the spirit of Jefferies. She feels the futility of her labours and those of everyone around her, a sense of the weariness of books and their uselessness as paths to wisdom.

The lack of light and stifling atmosphere are features common to both Gissing and Jefferies' vision of the Reading-room, seen as Piranesi prison rather than depository of the wisdom of the ages. Marian inveighs against writers endlessly making new books out of old:

It was gloomy, and one could scarcely see to read; a taste of fog grew perceptible in the warm, headachy air... all these people about her, what aim had they save to make new books out of those already existing, that yet newer books might in turn be made out of theirs? This huge library, growing into unwieldiness, threatening to become a trackless desert of print —

³⁰ *The Story of My Heart* [1883] (London: Quartet Books, 1979), p.76.

³¹ 'The Pigeons at the British Museum,' in *The Life of the Fields* [1884] (London: Chatto & Windus, 1906), p.217. Cf. 'Those thoughts I got from nature alone of any value. Books, etc. in vain. Nothing to tell me.' (*Note-books*, Looker ed., p.229)

³² 'The Pigeons at the British Museum,' p.218.

³³ *ibid.*

how intolerably it weighed upon the spirit!³⁴

and

She kept asking herself what was the use and purpose of such a life as she was condemned to lead. When already there was more good literature in the world than any mortal could cope with in his lifetime, here was she exhausting herself in the manufacture of printed stuff which no one even pretended to be more than a commodity for the day's market. What unspeakable folly!³⁵

Jefferies similarly ponders:

Sitting at these long desks and trying to read, I soon find I have made a mistake; it is not here I shall find that which I seek. Yet the magic of books draws me here time after time, to be as often disappointed. Something in a book tempts the mind as pictures tempt the eye; the eye grows weary of pictures, but looks again. The mind wearies of books, yet cannot forget that once when they were first opened in youth they gave it hope of knowledge. Those first books exhausted, there is nothing left but words and covers. It seems as if all the books in the world—really books—can be bought for £10. Man's whole thought is purchaseable at that small price, for the value of a watch, of a good dog. For the rest it is repetition and paraphrase.³⁶

The resemblances are enough to make one wonder if Gissing had read Jefferies' essay, and if both writers had at the back of their minds Wordsworth's 'The Tables Turned':

Books! 'tis a dull and endless strife:
Come, hear the woodland linnet,
How sweet his music! On my life
There's more of wisdom in it.

And hark! how blithe the throstle sings!
He, too, is no mean preacher:
Come forth into the light of things,
Let Nature be your Teacher...

The theme reappears at the end of Thomas's 'Sedge Warblers':

This was the best of May—the small brown birds
Wisely reiterating endlessly
What no man learnt yet, in and out of school.

*

New Grub Street examines the implications of a society 'where literature has become a commodity, and where the writing of fiction does not differ radically from any other form of commercial or industrial production'.³⁷

The novel chronicles the contrasting careers of Edwin Reardon and Jasper Milvain, two men opposed in personality and outlook. Reardon is a 32-year-old novelist who has enjoyed one modest success but been unable to follow it up. His last novel (*The Optimist*) was a failure, and he is struggling to finish his new three-decker, of whose flaws he is only

³⁴ Gissing, pp.137-8.

³⁵ *ibid.*, p.137.

³⁶ 'The Pigeons at the British Museum,' p.217.

³⁷ Bergonzi, introduction to *New Grub Street*, p.9.

too well aware. The author of the three-volume *Restless Human Hearts* and *World's End* would surely have sympathised with Reardon in his difficulty:

The second volume ought to have been much easier work than the first; it proved far harder. Messieurs and mesdames the critics are wont to point out the weakness of second volumes; they are generally right, simply because a story which would have made a tolerable book (the common run of stories) refuses to fill three books. Reardon's story was in itself weak, and this second volume had to consist almost entirely of laborious padding.³⁸

Reardon has much in common with his creator Gissing. He is what his friend Milvain calls "the old type of unpractical artist... He won't make concessions, or rather, he can't make them; he can't supply the market".³⁹ His books are "not works of genius, but they are glaringly distinct from the ordinary circulating novel."⁴⁰

Reardon, his attractive young wife Amy, and their ten-month-old child live in a top-floor flat near Regent's Park. Reardon's face wears 'the pallor of mental suffering'.⁴¹ Amy is beautiful but demanding, a grumbler discontented with her lot. She married Reardon in the first flush of his success. Now she hates their poverty and (with some justice) has come to regard her husband as weak and unmanly. 'Difficulties crush you,' she tells him, 'instead of rousing you to struggle.'⁴² She urges him to make his work more commercial. In defence Reardon replies that he's 'no uncompromising artistic pedant; I am quite willing to try and do the kind of work that will sell'.⁴³ But he is incapable. He shrinks from 'conscious insincerity of workmanship'.⁴⁴ He points out that 'a particular kind of faculty'⁴⁵ is required to write sensational stories.

Here it may be remarked, apropos the early novels turned out by Jefferies, that his heart was not fully in them, and that is in part why they were commercial as well as artistic failures. Yet the real self, if still undeveloped, would keep obtruding, so we have the peculiar spectacle of sensation fiction interspersed with passages revealing a truly romantic and spiritual nature. The writing of the early novels, as Thomas was the first to recognize, helped Jefferies discover his true self, both as man and writer.

Reardon had something else in common with Jefferies. He was an outsider, one who always found himself on the periphery. Before his marriage: 'solitude fostered a sensitiveness which to begin with was extreme... he was a reduse in the midst of millions'.⁴⁶ Jefferies felt a similar alienation from the mass of humanity. In his notebooks he wrote: 'I seem outside human beings, the others have some bond of sympathy in common. I try in vain to thrust myself in'.⁴⁷

Reardon is finally defeated by a combination of poverty, depression and ill-health—

³⁸ Gissing, p.161.

³⁹ *ibid.*, p.38.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p.60.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, p.77.

⁴² *ibid.*, p.80.

⁴³ *ibid.*, p.81.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, p.83.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, p.85.

⁴⁶ *ibid.*, p.90.

⁴⁷ *op.cit.*, p.233.

what Jefferies called the ‘three great giants’ of ‘disease, despair, and poverty’.⁴⁸ There was, however, one significant difference. Jessie Jefferies remained loyal and supportive to the end, acting as amanuensis in her husband’s final illness, when he was too weak to hold a pen and dictated his last essays—the prose equivalent of his contemporary Gerard Manley Hopkins’s ‘terrible’ sonnets. By contrast, Amy leaves Reardon because she cannot tolerate the penury, the cramped accommodation, shabbiness and penny-pinching of their lives. Reardon dies of fever and exhaustion, but reconciled with his wife, and purged of ambition. He dies with dignity: purified by his ordeal, his sufferings, and resigned to his fate. Shortly before the end he says:

The one happy result of my experiences... is that they have cured me of ambition. What a miserable fellow I should be if I were still possessed with the desire to make a name! I can’t even recall very clearly that state of mind. My strongest desire now is for peaceful obscurity. I am tired out; I want to rest for the remainder of my life.⁴⁹

Reardon is a lover, worshipper almost, of beauty, the star by which he has set his course. The defining experience of his life has been six months spent as a student in Italy and Greece, during which he read ‘little but Greek and Latin’:

‘That brought me out of the track I had laboriously made for myself; I often thought with disgust of the kind of work I had been doing; my novels seemed vapid stuff, so wretchedly and shallowly modern. If I had had the means, I should have devoted myself to the life of a scholar.’⁵⁰

Later, in the midst of his terrible decline, Reardon looks back at that time:

‘The best moments of life are those when we contemplate beauty in the purely artistic spirit—objectively. I have had such moments in Greece and Italy; times when I was a free spirit...’⁵¹

He describes a sunset in Athens in rapturous language akin to Jefferies’ evocation of the light-filled blue of the pre-dawn sky in *Benis*. Reardon’s aestheticism recalls that of Aymer Malet in *World’s End*, weeping before the statue of the Venus dei Medici in Florence, and the Jefferies of *The Denny Morn* and of ‘Nature in the Louvre.’ In the latter essay Jefferies relates how the statue known as the Stooping Venus became an object of almost daily pilgrimage during his visit to Paris in the autumn of 1883. The statue’s beauty led him to consider the reason for the spell cast by beauty in general:

I turned with threefold concentration of desire and love towards that expression of hope which is called beauty, such as is worked in marble here. For I think beauty is truthfully an expression of hope, and that is why it is so enthralling—because while the heart is absorbed in its contemplation, unconscious but powerful hope is filling the breast. So powerful is it as to banish for the time all care, and to make this life seem the life of the immortals.⁵²

⁴⁸ [Sir] Walter Besant, *The Eulogy of Richard Jefferies* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1889), p.364, citing an account of Jefferies’ last days by his friend the artist J.W. North, who wrote: ‘One thing I saw in one of his last note-books: “Three great giants are against me—disease, despair, and poverty”.’ The entry has not been traced in any of the extant note-books.

⁴⁹ Gissing, p.474.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, p.108.

⁵¹ *ibid.*, p.405.

⁵² ‘Nature in the Louvre,’ collected in *Field and Hedgerow* [1839] (London: Longmans, Green, and Co.,

In *New Grub Street* the idealistic Reardon is contrasted with the realist Jasper Milvain. Q.D. Leavis justly observed that ‘when any nineteenth-century novelist names a character Jasper I think we may safely conclude that that character is intended to be the villain,’⁵³ but though flawed, and acting despicably by jilting the admirable Marian Yule, Milvain is something more.

If Reardon’s career follows a downward trajectory, his friend Milvain is the rising young star. Holding forth to his two sisters he airily explains away Reardon’s difficulties as being the result of his refusal to treat literature as a trade:

‘Literature nowadays is a trade. Putting aside men of genius, who may succeed by mere cosmic force, your successful man of letters is your skilful tradesman. He thinks first and foremost of the markets; when one kind of goods begins to go off slackly, he is ready with something new and appetising. He knows perfectly all the possible sources of income.’⁵⁴

Milvain describes how he would have made money out of Reardon’s last unsuccessful novel *The Optimist* by shrewd dealing. He continues:

‘Reardon can’t do that kind of thing, he’s behind his age; he sells a manuscript as if he lived in Sam Johnson’s Grub Street. But our Grub Street of to-day is quite a different place: it is supplied with telegraphic communication, it knows what literary fare is in demand in every part of the world, its inhabitants are men of business, however seedy.’⁵⁵

Elsewhere he expatiates in similar vein:

‘People have got that ancient prejudice so firmly rooted in their heads—that one mustn’t write save at the dictation of the Holy Spirit. I tell you, writing is a business... There’s no question of the divine afflatus; that belongs to another sphere of life. We talk of literature as a trade, not of Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare. If I could only get that into poor Reardon’s head. He thinks me a gross beast, often enough. What the devil—I mean what on earth is there in typography to make everything it deals with sacred? I don’t advocate the propagation of vicious literature; I speak only of good, coarse, marketable stuff for the world’s vulgar.’⁵⁶

and

‘I maintain that we people of brains are justified in supplying the mob with the food it likes... If only I had the skill, I would produce novels out-trashing the trashiest that ever sold fifty thousand copies. But it needs skill, mind you; and to deny it is a gross error of the literary pedants. To please the vulgar you must, one way or another, incarnate the genius of vulgarity.’⁵⁷

Milvain stresses the importance of a ‘name’ to an author:

‘If I am an unknown man, and publish a wonderful book, it will make its way very slowly, or not at all. If I, become a known man, publish that very same book, its praise will echo over both hemispheres. I should be within the truth if I had said “a vastly inferior book,” but I am in a bland mood at present. Suppose poor Reardon’s novels had been published in the full

1895), pp.264-5.

⁵³ Leavis, p.75.

⁵⁴ Gissing, pp.38-9.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, p.39.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, p.43.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

light of reputation instead of in the struggling dawn which was never to become day, wouldn't they have been magnified by every critic? *You have to become famous before you can secure the attention which would give fame.*'

He delivered this apophthegm with emphasis, and repeated it in another form:

'You have to obtain reputation before you can get a fair hearing for that which would justify your repute. It's the old story of the French publisher who said to Dumas: "Make a name, and I'll publish anything you write." "But how the *diable*," cries the author, "am I to make a name if I can't get published?" If a man can't hit upon any other way of attracting attention, let him dance on his head in the middle of the street; after that he may hope to get consideration for his volume of poems.'⁵⁸

Milvain's views reflect his character. He is a young man on the make, a charming rogue with an eye to the main chance. He has an engaging honesty about his flaws, but we note that the frank avowal of his shortcomings relieves him of the necessity of correcting them. With respect to women he plays the field. He courts an heiress, and ditches Marian Yule, the only woman he loves (so far as such a narcissistic egoist is capable of love), for Reardon's widow Amy, who has unexpectedly inherited a small fortune and shares Milvain's hunger for success and a glittering place in society. The two marry and are happy, especially when Milvain is appointed editor of a prestigious review. Yet Milvain is not presented as essentially villainous. Gissing dearly admires his charm and energy, if not his ruthlessness and lack of scruple, while he equally makes plain the self-destructive side of Reardon's high-minded refusal to compromise his literary standards.

Milvain's views on literature as a trade and on the importance of having a name are identical to those expressed by Jefferies in his *Reporting; Editing & Authorship* manual, where he wrote:

In literature a name is everything. The public will read any commonplace clap-trap if only a well-known name be attached to it. Hence any amount of expenditure is justified with this object. It is better at once to realize the fact, however unpleasant it may be to the taste, and instead of trying to win the good-will of the public by laborious work, treat literature as a trade, which, like other trades, requires an immense amount of advertising.⁵⁹

Jefferies had a will to succeed not far short of Milvain's, and it would be idle to pretend that he did not have a similar manipulative, even Machiavellian streak. In this he was merely conforming to the prevalent system of values. The literary world in which he was trying to establish himself had taken a Darwinian cast, as acutely observed by Milvain, whose aphorism has an uncannily modern ring:

'The struggle for existence among books is nowadays as severe as among men.'⁶⁰

⁵⁸ *ibid.*, pp.421-2. P.G. Wodehouse's character Joss Weatherby, a talented artist forced by circumstances to design advertisements for a living, is caught in the same trap. He confides to his sweetheart Sally: 'Some day I hope to be able to be a portrait painter again. The difficulty is, of course, that in order to paint portraits you have to have sitters, and you can't get sitters till you've made a name, and you can't make a name till you've painted portraits. It is what is known as a vicious circle.' (*Quick Service*, Penguin 1968 edition, p.68)

⁵⁹ *Reporting; Editing & Authorship*, Practical Hints for Beginners in Literature (London: John Snow & Co., 1873), reprinted in two parts in the *Richard Jefferies Society Journal* No. 2 (Spring 1993, pp.3-12) and No. 3 (Spring 1994, pp.3-6), where the quotation appears on p.6.

⁶⁰ Gissing, p.493.

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