



## INTRODUCTION

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Richard Mabey

RICHARD JEFFERIES' *Wild Life in a Southern County* was my first encounter with nature writing. I was about twelve years old, and quite content with my rag-bag collection of I-Spy books and bird guides, texts about what was what, and where to find it. When I found my elder sister's copy of *Wild Life*, I was mesmerised. Here were thoughts about how animals might think, and how landscapes made you feel. I'd forgotten most of its contents within a month, but the title stuck in my imagination like the aura of a half-recollected dream, or a mantra: wild-life-in-a-southern-county. I was living in Hertfordshire then, and the only 'southern' place I'd been to was the beach at Pevensey. But my emotional compass was already set in that direction. South meant the chalk hills at the top of our road, rising towards the summer sun. South meant a view down along a wooded valley, my private heartland, and a thin stream that wound its silver way towards the high Chilterns. In those adolescent years – already an incipient romantic – I would stand at a ritually precise spot at the top of the hill and gaze down that valley in a state of muddled rapture. What I was looking at seemed both wild, numinous, somehow beyond reach and understanding, but also profoundly and anciently English.

No wonder Jefferies chimed with me. *Wild Life* (and note the powerful separation of those two normally conjoined words) is a collection of free-range essays exploring the author's unresolved feelings about the relations between the natural and human worlds. It's set in the very human context of the Wiltshire smallholding where he grew up, but is peopled mostly by non-human species. Jefferies makes the dialectic between these two worlds explicit in his short preface: 'There is a frontier line to civilisation in this country yet, and not far outside its great centres we come quickly even now

to the borderland of nature. . . . If we go a few hours journey only, and then step just beyond the highway – where the steam-ploughing engine has left the mark of its wide wheels on the dust – and glance into the hedgerow, the copse, or stream, there are nature’s children as unrestrained in their wild, free life as they were in the veritable backwoods of primitive England.’

But the frontier is porous, fluid, debatable. Living things – humans included – pass across it, in both directions. So do ways of perceiving them, which can be coloured both by the civilised, rational mind or the feral imagination. Later in the preface Jefferies writes that ‘nature is not cut and dried to hand, nor easily classified, each subject shading gradually into another. In studying the ways, for instance of so common a bird as the starling it cannot be separated from the farmhouse in the thatch of which it often breeds, the rooks with whom it associates, or the friendly sheep upon whose backs it sometimes rides.’ This ‘shading’ of subjects is an exact description of Jefferies’ meandering prose-style, and there is, I suspect, an element of rationalisation here of its sometimes chaotic discursiveness. But he was an intuitive ecologist, and this insistence on the connectivity of the natural world is a theme that runs through the book, and justifies his grouping of its contents by habitats. Except that they are not truly natural habitats, but the human landscapes around Coate Farm, near Swindon, where Jefferies was born and lived until he was eighteen: orchard, woodpile, homefield, ash copse, rabbit warren.

But there is sleight of place, and memory, here. Although *Wild Life* is set in Wiltshire, in the present tense, it was written in Surbiton in 1878-9, more than a decade after the encounters it chronicles. Jefferies was then thirty years old and had moved to suburban Surrey to be closer to the London newspaper world. The book is quarried from articles he contributed to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, early examples of what has become an enduring form in British journalism – the ‘Country Diary’.

Jefferies’ distance from the scenes he is describing (it was also, as we’ll see later, a social distancing) helps account for his fascination with borderlands, and for what is a dominant motif in the book. If the thread which runs through Edward Thomas’ analogous, echoic *The South Country* (1909)

is the pathway, on which he could walk himself up and out of his black moods (Thomas published a biography of Jefferies in the same year), the keynote of Jefferies' *Wild Life* is the hedgerow, in which he can burrow down, away from the messiness of human society. The hedge is the 'frontier line to civilisation'. It is a mark of division in the affairs of humans, but a connective tissue for wildlife. It represents refuge, but also a kind of linear commonland. Jefferies recalls, in a later book, how his father used to point with disgust to 'our Dick poking about in them hedges', and like the poet John Clare, he is most at home – and at his best as a writer – in the hedge-bottom looking out, not on the hilltop taking imperious (or queasily spiritual) views of the landscape below. In one passage he recounts how, peering through a gap in a hedge, he once experienced a kind of optical illusion, in which a hill he knew suddenly appeared vastly higher than it had before. A cloud was resting on its top, and for a while had taken on the exact shape and tone of the hill. With the rest of the range obscured by the hedge, this glimpse through the gap revealed something closer to an alp. The aesthete always lurked, sometimes enlighteningly, sometimes subversively, inside the watchful naturalist.

More literally, hedges were the 'highways' of Jefferies' wild neighbours. Birds and animals passed up and down them between the copses and the farm. One major 'caravan route . . . abuts on the orchard [and] the finches, after spending a little time in the apple and damson trees, fly over the wall and road to [a] second hedge, and follow it down for nearly half a mile to a little enclosed meadow, which, like the orchard, is a specially favourite resort'. It isn't hard to imagine 'our Dick' himself dodging the waves of tits and blossom-haunting goldfinches ('a flood of sunshine falling through a roof of rosy pink') building up a map of their movements and 'resorts', and in the process conjuring the outlines of what sometimes seemed to him the skeleton or ghostly relics of the Wiltshire wildwood.

Jefferies' attention to what he saw is rapt, exact, almost painterly. The look of nature seemed to him as good a guide as any to its meaning and order. He notices the sparkle of ice on the high branches of beech trees in winter, and suggests that this 'proves that water is often present in the atmosphere

in large quantities'. His vivid description of a magpie's movements perfectly catches the bird's character, but also begins to explain what it may be up to in its seemingly erratic foragings: 'he walks now to the right, a couple of yards, now to the left in a quick zigzag, so working across the field towards you; then with a long rush he makes a lengthy traverse at the top of his speed, turns and darts away again at right angles, and presently up goes his tail and he throws his head down with a jerk of the whole body as if he would thrust his beak deep into the earth.' He devotes almost two pages to the ripening colours of wheat, noting a moment when it briefly pales during a breeze, 'because the under part of the ear is shown and part of the stalk'. He listens to the heavy buzz of hornets, and peers at them intently enough to know they are the most inoffensive of insects. And he watches a thrush smashing a snail on a sarsen stone: 'about two such blows break the shell, and he then coolly chips the fragments off as you might from an egg'.

There is a kind of hedge-scientist at work behind these observations, thinking by analogy, forging explanations by the application of reason (or at least a particular kind of reason) to acute observation. Jefferies rarely attempts to test his theories methodically, and never quotes the opinions or experiences of any other naturalists. He is an intellectual hermit. This occasionally leads him towards conclusions that today would be regarded as fanciful. He observes the large clutch size and sociable behaviour of long-tailed tits (cousins and unpaired birds often help with the feeding of the young), and concludes that several female birds lay their eggs in one communal nest. A cuckoo lingering close to the nest where she's laid her egg makes him 'doubt the cuckoo's alleged total indifference to her young'. He is also sceptical about cuckoos' host species failing to recognise that the monstrous chick growing in their nest is not one of their own. 'The robin is far too intelligent. Why, then, does he feed the intruder? There is something here approaching to the sentiment of humanity, as we should call it, towards the fellow creature.'

What lies behind these convictions is Jefferies' unusual attitude towards the idea of 'instinct'. He regards this as an inadequate explanation of the behaviour of wild creatures because they so often make mistakes. He tells

the story of a party of sand martins attempting to quarry their nest-holes in the mortar of a thick stone wall at Coate Farm. It was a fruitless task, and 'At last, convinced of the impossibility of penetrating the mortar, which was much harder beneath the surface, they went away in a body . . . Instinct, infallible instinct, certainly would not direct these birds to such an unsuitable spot . . . The incident was clearly an experiment, and when they found it unsuccessful, they desisted.' A more conventional scientific explanation would be that it was precisely the martins' instinct for exploring soft stone that led them to the wall. But Jefferies' beguiling and sympathetic interpretation was correct, and far-sighted; he had simply adopted an over-deterministic view of the nature of instinct, seeing it as infallible, or 'blind'. Intelligent experimentation and exploration are now regarded as entirely compatible with broad instinctual drives.

Jefferies' belief in the free-will of other beings, in the maternal cuckoo and the compassionate robin, extended to an insistence that animals felt joy in their lives: 'You may see it in every motion: in the lissom bound of the hare, the playful leap of the rabbit, the song that the lark and the finch must sing'. But, inside *Wild Life* at least, his sympathy with other creatures is patchy and inconsistent. There is a detachment in his prose, which displays plenty of intense curiosity, but little revelation about his own feelings. After a spellbinding and affectionate account of the family life of kingfishers, for instance, he gives, quite casually, as if he had forgotten what he said about joy, instructions about the best way to shoot the birds, especially the youngsters.

The fact is that, at this stage in his life, Jefferies had not yet worked out which side of that 'frontier line' he was on – anchored with civilisation, or on the wing with unrestrained nature. *Wild Life in a Southern County*, his second non-fiction book, is a transitional work, marking the beginnings of a shift away from such simplistic separations of the world. Contrary to the popular image of him as a deep-rooted countryman, Jefferies was a displaced person almost from birth. Aged four, he was despatched from his family's declining farm to live with an aunt in Sydenham. When he was nine he returned home, only to be shunted off to a succession of private

schools in Swindon. No wonder he developed into a moody and solitary adolescent. He began reading Rabelais, and spent long days roaming the hill country round Marlborough. When he was sixteen he ran away from home with his cousin, first to France, and then to Liverpool, where he was found by the police and shipped back to Wiltshire. When the smallholding was badly hit by cattle plague in 1865, he left school for good, and started work in Swindon on a new Conservative paper, *The North Wilts Herald*, where he was a jack-of-all-trades reporter and resident short-story writer. At the end of the 1860s he became vaguely ill, left the paper and took a long recuperative holiday in Brussels. He was extravagantly delighted by the women, the fashions, the sophisticated manners, and from letters to his aunt it is clear what he was beginning to think of the philistinism of Wiltshire society.

He returned to Coate Farm in 1871, with no job and no money. His life began to slip into a mould more typical of the anxious, hand-to-mouth existence of the urban freelance, than of a supposed 'son of the soil'. He wrote a play, a memoir of a prospective Member of Parliament, a right-wing pamphlet that ridiculed the advance of popular education. His breakthrough came with a letter to the *Times* in a similar Conservative vein, scorning the habits, intelligence and apathy of the Wiltshire farm labourer. The letter won him sympathy from landowners, and offers of more journalistic work, and for the next few years he wrote copiously on rural affairs for *Fraser's Magazine* and the *Live Stock Journal*.

His increasing journalistic commitments sparked the move to Surbiton, and regular essays for the *Pall Mall Gazette*, in which he reminisces – albeit in an idealistic way – about life back at Coate. His first fully-fledged non-fiction work, *The Gamekeeper at Home*, is made up of pieces written for the *Gazette* between late 1877 and spring '78. It is essentially a tribute to 'the master's' man and an account of the practical business of policing a sporting estate, and maintains the Conservative, deferential tone of his early journalism. The pieces for *Wild Life* appeared in the *Gazette* between 1878 and '79, and though in them is a new sympathy with the farm worker, and the first glimpses of his nature writing potential, flashes

of the old right-wing shooting man continue to appear.

Jefferies had only eight years left to live at this point. He developed tuberculosis in 1881, and pain and disenchantment colour the rest of his work. He seems at last to understand the preciousness of life, to be engaged with it, not just as a curious observer but as a fellow being. His beliefs shift radically towards a kind of pantheism, and politically towards libertarian socialism. In his late essays he begins to write of the history, politics, ecology and aesthetics of the land as part of a single complex experience.

These final essays, such as 'Hours of Spring' (1886) and 'Walks in the Wheat-fields' (1887) are his most mature and powerful. But *Wild Life in a Southern County* contains their first buds. To read these essays today is chastening. There is, in the best of them, an electric attentiveness, a noticing, that is hard to aspire to. They are chastening, too, in what they are able to describe – an abundance of bird and insect life that, despite the contemporary passion for slaughter (in which the author played his part), is unimaginable in the modern industrial countryside. The great set-piece of *Wild Life*, 'Rooks returning to roost' is like an epic Victorian narrative painting, full of intense images – the sound of thousands of black wings 'beating the air with slow steady stroke can hardly be compared with anything else in its weird oppressiveness'; full too of a sense of the deep history, the natural 'tradition' of these great nightly migrations. And of one stunning statistic: the 'aerial army's line of march extends over quite five miles in one unbroken corps'. Jefferies did not know this, but he was sending, in a faltering new language, a message in a bottle from a disappearing country.

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