

bidding" imply a knowledge of what she is doing that is rarely so explicit in her novels.

IN *More Women Than Men* (1933) the scene is laid in a girl's school where the headmistress guards dependent male relatives with the ferocity of a tigress protecting her kill. There are indeed sufficient differences of theme in the Compton-Burnett canon to reward the faithful. But all her books bear the clear marks of, this noble and specialised talent for expressing family life in terms of a rich, subdued comedy, a civilised, critical comedy, which does not tilt at conventions but at character itself. It is the dominance of the many by the one which is the grand Compton-Burnett theme, the many taking refuge in the brilliantly sardonic utterance, the epigram, which, though it is itself a revenge, does not altogether assuage the bitterness of the wound.

A Marxist would find grounds for exclamation in the way in which property is a sort of divine predestination in her novels. A psychologist would have other fish to fry. The ordinary reader (that semi-mythical personage) may well find these novels rather demanding; they are not easily read and every word counts. Once he has made this initial effort of the attention, he will recognise the hand of the master in all her work, the extraordinary courage and individuality. Jane Austen chronicled a society; Miss Compton-Burnett prefers to create one.

#### A NATURALIST'S SATCHEL

*BEVIS*, by Richard Jefferies; Eyre and Spottiswoode. 8/6.

*ROUND ABOUT A GREAT ESTATE* and *RED DEER*, by Richard Jefferies; Eyre and Spottiswoode. 5/-.

*THE GAMEKEEPER AT HOME* and *THE AMATEUR POACHER*, by Richard Jefferies; World's Classics Series. Oxford University Press. 4/-.

*THE JEFFERIES COMPANION*, Arranged and Introduced by Samuel J. Looker; Phoenix House. 8/6.

*THE ESSENTIAL RICHARD JEFFERIES*, Selected with an introduction by Malcolm Elwin; Jonathan Cape. 12/6.

*THE PHASIAN BIRD*, by Henry Williamson; Faber and Faber. 10/6.

*SONS OF THE FARM*, by Crichton Porteous; Michael Joseph. 9/6.

THE Richard Jefferies books in this list all appeared to mark the centenary of the naturalist's birth in 1848. The pleasant blue cloth uniform edition of the favourite *Bevis* (still, after 70 years, a magnificent boys' adventure tale), and two other well-known works, *Round About a Great Estate* and *Red Deer*, will be welcome additions to many a youthful library; and the World's Classics edition of *The Gamekeeper at Home* and *The Amateur Poacher* (the pro and con of a very old game) together in one book for 4/- will appeal to most collectors.

Here are five works issued in three books full of small type and tight margins—and they are only five out of 23 that Jefferies published in his lifetime; 23 books he published, and he died two months before his 39th birthday.

At 17 this restless son of a Wiltshire small farmer began work as a reporter on a provincial newspaper;



at 32 he fell ill of the disease of which he died (fibroid phthisis); so we may say that he had 15 years of vigour and seven of intermittent pain "like lightning" for his work. Huge output alone is no claim to praise; but this huge output should at least be noted. Richard Jefferies may have been lazy about his father's farm as a boy—"our Dick poking about in them hedges"—but he was certainly not lazy as a writer of words, or as an observer of the birds, flowers, bees, fields and skies that were his passionate interest.

He was, however, careless, repetitive and egotistical. *The Jefferies Companion*, edited and introduced with admirable restraint by one of the most fervid Jefferies admirers, Samuel J. Looker, contains the preface supplied by Jefferies for an edition of Gilbert White's *The Natural History of Selborne*, which opens in White's water-clear prose: "The parish of Selborne lies in the extreme eastern corner of the county of Hampshire, bordering on the county of Sussex, and not far from the county of Surrey." Says Jefferies, presumably with the book before him: "The mass of this book was collected in the little Surrey parish of Selborne." For this I could forgive him; but not for this (in praise of White's *Naturalists' Calendar*): "By its aid you will miss very little. I did not come across Mr. White's book till late in the day, when it was, in fact, too late, else this Calendar would have been of the utmost advantage to me." Much chagrined, I turned for balm to Gilbert White's letters and spent some happy hours with his pig, his earthworms, his old Sussex tortoise and others.

*The Companion*, and *The Essential* Richard Jefferies are much alike in content, except that the first is illustrated and the second is not; and except that the introduction by Malcolm Elwin is a little more critical than Mr. Looker's introduction to *The Companion*. Both include extracts from the main works. If the word "essential" means what I think it means then the title of the second book is badly chosen—the extracts from "The Story of My Heart," for instance, run to 70 pages, "The Dewy Morn" to 33 pages, and these are both wordy, windy, repetitive affairs.

But there they are, two useful Jefferies collections to add to a naturalist's library.

*The Phasian Bird* opens in Mr. Henry Williamson's measured and leisurely prose. Where Richard Jefferies goes over, smoothes out, pats and irons flat, Mr. Williamson goes bang for the word that counts: so you meet "the bee-like chicks"; you hear the grasscutter "clacker" round the field; you see the triangle of uncut grass becoming smaller and smaller and you know the unhappiness of the farmer who knows that in there in that shrinking sanctuary of grass-forest a mother bird, some chicks, a few leverets are sheltering, bewildered. Part-ridge versus rat, rat versus weasel, foot, claw, pad, wing and

(continued on next page)

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