Graham Stoate

The unconscious teaching of the country — A rereading of Bevis: The Story of a Boy

Richard Jefferies was born at Coate near Swindon on 6th November, 1846. He began his literary career as a reporter on the North Wilts. Herald in 1866, and wrote later for several magazines and newspapers. Bevis: The Story of a Boy, first published in 1882, and its predecessor, Wood Magic (1881), represent something of a personal landmark for Jefferies: a literary transition from the pure description of his early natural history essays which had established his reputation as a writer, to the more esoteric style of his later works, culminating in the heady nature mysticism of The Story of My Heart (1883). His two books for children are important works in the history of juvenile literature as early examples of a tendency which rejected the overt didacticism of many Victorian children's novels in favour of a freer and more natural imaginative style. Bevis has offered to generations of young readers that joy in the independent life savoured by numerous heroes from Robinson Crusoe onwards. Jefferies's literary career was tragically brief, for he died on 14th August, 1887, his death certificate recording the cause: 'Chronic Fibroid Phthisis. Exhaustion.'

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The invariable response to the name of the nineteenth-century writer Richard Jefferies is the question, vaguely asked, "Isn't that the man who wrote Bevis?" There is perhaps a dim remembrance of having read the boys' classic adventure story as a child and correspondingly little recollection of its merits. With the recent reprinting of the book, which includes the excellent original illustrations by the late Ernest Shepard, it is appropriate that it should be reexamined here.

There is an inherent difficulty in attempting a critical appraisal of a book written for children and it is precisely the same challenge which faces the children's author: What appeals to the adult sensibility does not, necessarily,
Kenneth Sterck, writing in this journal, has diagnosed correctly the source of this dilemma; 'the novelist's theme,' he affirms, is calculated to amuse children while his own interests have developed in other, and for them, alien, directions. So if he writes exclusively for the child he may starve his adult perceptions, whereas adult reflection may block the flow of incident which sustains a child's interest.

Richard Jefferies's Bevis is interesting because its author attempts to weave these two elements, narrative structure and 'adult reflection', into his writing and, in this abridged edition at least, is relatively successful.