

Pastoral perfection or tormented toil?
contrasting views of rural labour
in the second half of the
nineteenth century, in works by
Richard Jefferies and John Linnell

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This article considers and contrasts the representations of the life of the agricultural labourer in the second half of the nineteenth century by Richard Jefferies (1848–87), and John Linnell (1792–1882), one a writer and the other an artist. Linnell painted the labourers as happy and contented. Jefferies wrote of them as downtrodden, hungry and miserable. A comparison is made of passages from articles originally written by Jefferies for magazines and an image by Linnell, The Cornfield Cradle (1859). This article will argue that Jefferies was driven by a desire to improve the lot of the labourer and that Linnell was following accepted artistic and social conventions, while also being influenced by religious and commercial considerations.



Figure 1. John Linnell, *The Cornfield Cradle*, (1859), oil on wood, 67cm × 100.5 cm. York Museum Trust, CC BY-NC-ND.

Richard Jefferies (1848–87) had only a short life, dying aged 38 after a long illness, but wrote extensively for newspapers and magazines and in novels about the countryside of southern England. He wrote lyrically about what he saw but was also not afraid to comment with a sharp pen on social issues. By contrast, John Linnell (1792–1882) had a long life dying just shy of his ninetieth birthday. He started as a portraitist and settled into landscape painting, mostly in Surrey and Sussex in the mid-nineteenth century. He was scarred in his youth by the bankruptcy of his father and determined at a young age that he would not suffer the same fate.¹ This influenced his choice of subjects, and he viewed art as a business rather than a vocation.² Both men came from humble backgrounds with fathers who suffered financial failures: they were students of nature, and in the landscape, they both, in their different ways, found the divine. Both were non-conformist in matters of religion and their politics were of the radical conservative strain. Despite those similarities, they had deeply divergent views on how the lives of agricultural labourers in the south of England should be described and depicted. Linnell saw the labourers as if in Arcadia, and Jefferies as if in Hell.

1 D. Linnell, *Blake, Palmer, Linnell and Co, The Life of John Linnell* (Lewes: The Book Guild, 1994) p. 73.

2 Linnell, *Blake, Palmer, Linnell and Co.*, p. 21.

3 C. Payne, *Toil and Plenty, Images of the Agricultural Landscape in England 1780–1890* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) p. 44.

4 R. Jefferies, *The Toilers of the Field* (London: Macdonald Futura Publishers, 1981), p. 73, 88, 92.

‘The emphasis on rural misery was always more suited to literary than artistic expression.’³ This proposition by Christiana Payne can be supported with regard to Jefferies and Linnell by examining texts from Jefferies and analysis of Linnell’s *The Cornfield Cradle* (1859). Here is an example of Jefferies’ writing after his travels through rural locations around Swindon in Wiltshire:

In the life of the English agricultural labourer there is absolutely no poetry, no colour...The sun burns and scorches...the heated earth reflects the rays, and the straw is warm to the touch...the standing corn, nearly as high as the reaper, keeps off the breeze...grasping the straw continuously cuts and wounds the hand...the woman’s bare neck is turned to the colour of tan; her thin muscular arms bronzed right up to the shoulder...right through the hottest part of the day they labour...cases of vertigo and vomiting are frequent...gleaning – poetical gleaning – is the most unpleasant and uncomfortable of labour, tedious, slow back aching work.⁴

This description, using direct and almost violent language, lays out the unhappy working life of the reaper and gleaner for whom there is no romance in ‘poetical gleaning’, just the harsh reality of injurious physical labour.

Considering this against Linnell’s *The Cornfield Cradle*, it is not difficult to see the disjunctive dissonance and incompatibility of the visual and the verbal.

The meanness of the lives of the labouring poor had no place in Linnell’s Arcadian images and neither political nor social issues were permitted to encroach on his aesthetic vision as can be seen from an example of his work, *The Cornfield Cradle* (see Fig. 1).

In this painting, a plump young mother is piling stooks of corn into a wigwam to protect her toddler from the sun. Her hair is neat and covered by a cap, she has lace at the collar of her pink gown, there is no sign of Jefferies’ ‘thin muscular arm bronzed up to the shoulder’. She has her long sleeves rolled up and has an air of serenity. Her husband, brawny with a ruddy countenance, shows a lower arm that is too pale to have had much exposure to the sun, nor is he ‘burned black and visibly thin.’⁵ The blond and well-covered infant has a rosy complexion and is smiling happily. Another young woman wearing a ribboned bonnet holds out her arms to play with the child and inside the improvised tent are the provisions for the day. This is a happy family taking care of their child. At the rear of the

5 R. Jefferies, *Field and Hedgerow*, 2nd edn (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1889) p. 132.

6 C. Wood, *Paradise Lost: Paintings of English Country Life and Landscape 1850–1914* (London: Grange Books, 1993) p. 81.

7 Linnell, *Blake, Palmer, Linnell and Co.*, p. 26.

8 Jefferies, *Toilers of the Field*, p. 91.

picture, four men can be seen scything the corn, which for Linnell is symbolic of God’s bounty.⁶ He believed that God was the source of his inspiration and that God revealed his divinity visibly in the natural world, and that belief allowed Linnell to use the landscape as a forum for his religious sentiment.⁷ The landscape unfolds behind them with Linnell’s characteristic billowing white clouds scudding across the sky, occasionally parting to show the blue sky. This could be, given Linnell’s religious feelings, an echo of the Holy Family. The iconography is of Mary and Joseph, the humble parents of the Christ child, laying him on a bed of straw as they did in Bethlehem. In this image, there is poetry and colour and none of the harshness on which Jefferies comments, and scant sign of the ‘life of endless labour’.⁸

In *The Cornfield Cradle*, there is no contamination of the landscape with starving labourers bent to the scythe. By contrast, Jefferies described the reapers in forceful and graphic language which emphasised the physicality of their work and suffering:

They worked and slaved and tore at the wheat as if they were seized with a frenzy, the heat, the aches, the illness, the sunstroke, always impending in the air, the stomach hungry again

before the meal was over... never was such work ... these miserables would have prayed for permission to tear their arms from the sockets, and to scorch and shrivel themselves to charred human brands in the furnace of the sun.⁹

The family shown by Linnell suffer none of these privations; they add narrative interest and assist composition and colour. Linnell is preserving rather than disrupting and seeking to control not only the landscape but the people in it. It could be argued that he is displaying some measure of social awareness by including labouring figures at all, but he does not disclose their hard lives and presents an Arcadian vision.

Myths of Arcadia, a place where man lived in harmony with nature, survived into the nineteenth century. It was the subject of poetry and art over many centuries going back to Virgil's *Georgics* in 29 BCE but by the middle of the nineteenth century, the realities of an agricultural labourer's existence bore no resemblance to the myth. Nevertheless, although writers were more willing to expose reality, not many landscape painters chose to do so: 'very few Victorian pictures actually convey the sense of physical strain and grinding labour that harvesting involved.'¹⁰ Despite these factors, as is evident from this harvest scene,

9 R. Jefferies, *Field and Hedgerow*, p. 132.

10 C. Wood, *Paradise Lost*, p. 84.

11 Linnell, Blake, Palmer, Linnell and Co, p. 349.

12 Jefferies, *Toilers of the Field*, p. 69, 137.

Linnell located Arcadia in the present, or what appeared to be the present, as he sketched en plein air.¹¹ He excluded all signs of modernity such as farm machinery which might otherwise defile the purity of nature and he stereotyped the workers as well-fed and contented.

By contrast, Jefferies writes of the life of the labourer as unremittingly harsh, living in out-of-repair, dilapidated and tumbledown cottages hard by the roadside. In an article for *Fraser's Magazine*, 'The labourer's daily life', he describes the typical cottage:

The rain comes through the hole in the thatch...the mud floor is damp... the cold wind comes through the ill-fitting sashes...there is a constant tendency in rainy weather for the water to run in...the thatch is saturated...the wretched place looks not unlike a dunghill...Here there was nothing but hard and scanty fare, no heat, no light, nothing to cheer the heart, nothing to cause it to forget the toil of the day and the thought of the morrow.¹²

Jefferies documents what he sees in an unsentimental way, using plain and blunt language. He gives a sense of the bleakness - 'nothing to cheer the heart' - with the damp, dripping and dispiriting cottage offering no refuge from either the weather or the world.

He does not constrain himself in the interests of politeness to make scenes of the worker's life prettier than they were. He aims to evoke reality in the reader's mind, and he claimed that he described real people, places and events.¹³ He rhetorically asks why the labourers undertake agricultural work and answers: 'because hunger and thirst drive them.'¹⁴

If any confirmation of Jefferies' desolate view is needed then it can be found in the 1867 'Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture.'¹⁵ Although the title refers to women and children, this lengthy report lays bare the desperate state of many agricultural workers, of all ages and genders, who did not enjoy even the limited protection given to factory workers. The report comments on the cottages unfit for human habitation, the lack of education for children who were taken out of school to work on the land and the poor pay and conditions for agricultural workers generally. The agricultural economy was in a period of transition from the eighteenth century and through the nineteenth century, evolving in reaction to factors including: national population increase, the enclosure movement

13 G. Miller and H. Mathews, (eds.) *Richard Jefferies A Biographical Study* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1993) p. 24.

14 R. Jefferies, in Miller and Mathews, *Richard Jefferies*, p. 51.

15 Her Majesty's Stationery Office, *First Report of the Commissioners on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture* (1867), 1868.

16 R. Jefferies, *The Life of the Fields*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1921) p. 124.

17 W. Cobbett, *Rural Rides*, Project Gutenberg.org, p. 273, ebook 34238, p. 273.

which favoured landowners and removed traditional rights to cultivate common land, and technological developments in machinery which meant that there was reduced ability for self-sufficiency in food production. These factors resulted in increasing hardship and lowering wages for the peasant class.

Linnell's painted Arcadian aesthetics were not shared by Jefferies who commented that it was a mistake made by painters that they ignored 'modern aspects, doubtless under the impression that to admit them would impair the pastoral scene' and that, although the images could be beautiful, 'they lack the force of truth and reality.'¹⁶ Jefferies was by no means alone in drawing attention to the lot of the agricultural labourer. In 1825, William Cobbett in *Rural Rides* described them as: 'Thin, ragged, shivery, dejected mortals such as never were seen in any country upon earth'.¹⁷ It should be noted however, that not all writers took such a grim view of agricultural life. There was, for some, a vested interest in demonstrating it as highly desirable, using a picturesque description as, for example, an aid to selling a book such as *Pictorial Calendar of the Seasons* (1854), as this extract shows:

See yonder that line of lusty mowers... how vigorous, how cheerful their appearance...truly cornfields... suggest to us many wonderful and lovely passages of life from the remotest times.¹⁸

This conforms much more to Linnell's idyllic scenes, which came out of the Romantic tradition of the picturesque, but the artist was ignoring an insistent and increasing focus on the situation of the agricultural worker, not only from the pen of Jefferies but also in periodicals such as *The Cornhill Magazine*, which supported the labourers in attempts to improve their 'hard and joyless existence.'¹⁹ Although some critics agitated for more realism, particularly in the 1860s and 1870s, when the differences between what was shown on canvas and what was, in reality, happening in the fields was becoming noticeable, others were very content with Linnell's depictions.²⁰

Linnell continued painting these picturesque and invented scenes because that is what his customers desired to buy: they wanted the reassurance that the world was stable and would carry on in the future as it had in the past.

There was a nostalgic and sentimental appeal of a return to innocence and nature, and the evocations of rustic simplicity were a solace.²¹ Many of the buyers were northern industrialists only too aware of the terrible living and working conditions in the towns. Would such a purchaser want to hang in his home a picture which showed the true reality of rural life? As remarked by Janet Wolff, 'what gets produced is often determined by straightforward economic facts.'²² This observation is echoed by Susan Owens: 'Landscape[s]...had become therapy...they sold.'²³ Landscape painters benefited from the greater acceptance of landscape as a noble and suitable subject for great art, and it was a time described as 'The Golden Age of the living painter.'²⁴ Linnell, with his images of harmonious, heart-warming and sentimental harvest scenes was one of the most highly paid artists of the time. Further, to have painted the harsh realities might have fed fear of social unrest among the propertied classes. In the nineteenth century there were outbreaks of machinery breaking and rick burning. Jefferies remarks: 'The Arcadian innocence of the hayfield...is the most barefaced

fiction'.²⁵

'Everything he did was conditioned by his desire to earn sufficient, for Linnell, art was a business and he viewed himself as a tradesman, calling his studio a 'workshop'.²⁶ From the age of eighteen, he kept careful account books and never allowed buyers, whether dealers or not, any credit. His attitude to money was well known in the artistic community and did not conform to contemporary practice. His fear of bankruptcy, and the size of his family, with nine children and twenty-nine grandchildren goes some way to explain why he was willing to paint to satisfy popular taste and thereby to increase sales. It was the art market's appetites that drove Linnell's artistic production. As he got older, his painted labourers became fatter and jollier: they were freighted with sentimentality and myth.

Jefferies had a similar start in life in the sense that his father failed in his agricultural business and became a member of the servant class, but he did not pander to sentimentality in the passages discussed here.²⁷ His reaction to his father's reduced circumstances was not as extreme as that of Linnell although in his writing he did struggle with the conflict between

the romantic and the realistic. 'We all know so well the dread of poverty,' wrote Jefferies.²⁸ The evidence from the Jefferies passages quoted in this article suggests that, even if he was conflicted, he was not afraid to use bold language to uncover what he saw as empirical and observed truth: 'you cannot get away from the coarseness...of life'.²⁹ Jefferies writes of the 'blunting of all fine feeling' in the labourers:

The coarse, half cooked cabbage, the small bit of fat and rafty bacon... makes no very hearty supper after a day such as this...His bodily frame becomes crusted over...and with this indifference there rises up at the same time a corresponding dullness.³⁰

He is describing the deadening effect on body and spirit of a miserable life constrained by poverty. None of this is apparent in the family in *The Cornfield Cradle*.

Linnell wrote poetry and believed that painting should reveal a moral or spiritual truth. This extract from one of his poems makes plain his strong religious feeling that good things, such as a bounteous harvest, come from God:

18 John Wilson, quoted in C. Payne, *Toil and Plenty*, p. 27.

19 *The Cornhill Magazine*, Vol. 29 (1874), pp. 686 - 697.

20 C. Payne, *Toil and Plenty*, p. 21.

21 T. Barringer, *Men at Work: Art and Labour in Victorian Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005) p. 88.

22 J. Wolff, *The Social Production of Art*, 2nd edn, (London: Macmillan Press, 1993) p. 46.

23 S. Owens, *Spirit of Place, Artist, Writers and the British Landscape* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2020) p. 219.

24 G. Reitlinger, *The Economics of Taste, The Rise and Fall of the Picture Market 1760-1960* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1961) p. 143.

25 Jefferies, *Toilers of the Field*, p. 87.

26 Linnell, *Blake, Palmer, Linnell and Co.*, p. 21.

27 Miller and Mathews, *Richard Jefferies*, p. 479.

28 Miller and Mathews, *Richard Jefferies*, p. 486.

29 Miller and Mathews, *Richard Jefferies*, p. 484.

30 Jefferies, *Toilers of the Field*, p. 72.

I'll paint the reapers in the harvest field
 At work or rest, for both will yield
 Pictures of happiness and bounteous love,
 Bestowed on just and unjust from above.³¹

Jefferies was himself religious, without ever accepting any formal religion. He describes spirituality in mystical terms in lengthy texts of intense feeling praying 'that I might touch to the unutterable existence infinitely higher than deity.'³² Nature and the natural world was his religion and he believed, above all, in the soul: 'an inner consciousness which aspires.'³³ Nevertheless, the powerful spiritual forces that resided in him did not blind him to the harsh realities that he observed and wrote about in trenchant terms.

John Barrell argues in *The Dark Side of the Landscape* (1980), and concerning the seventy years up to 1840, that it was not merely social, (rather than aesthetic) convention that dictated the appearance of the labourer in paintings as cheerful, submissive and grateful; it was also a deliberate act of subversion

of the truth for the benefit of the "the rich" who feared social unrest arising from 'increasing literacy and their own class consciousness.'³⁴ In the aftermath of the French Revolution, artistic sentiment moved from reason and order to a focus on emotion and imagination.³⁵ As noted above, Linnell displayed a Romantic tendency in his landscapes of southern England. In his depiction of agricultural labourers, he shows a functioning hierarchy and social harmony; he ignores the realities of their lives and also evades showing the march of progress through the mechanisation of agricultural work. Steam-powered threshing machines were widely used by the mid-century but do not make an appearance in his images.³⁶ As "the rich" were Linnell's patrons, he had a reason to subvert the truth although there is no evidence that he feared social unrest and so deliberately falsified his images. He was more concerned with depicting 'nature's aura'.³⁷

During the period in which Jefferies was writing, the plight of the agricultural worker was a much more widely discussed problem than could be believed from evaluating the offerings

at the Royal Academy exhibitions in the period, where artists depicting the dark side of the landscape were few and far between.³⁸ As Jefferies wrote: 'Behind the beautiful aspects comes the reality of human labour, hours upon hours of heat and strain...the wheat is beautiful but human life is labour'.³⁹ George Eliot was also aware of the discrepancies between fact and fiction writing: 'the painter is still under the influence of idyllic literature, which has always expressed the imagination of the cultivated and town-bred, rather than the truth of rustic life.'⁴⁰ Social realism - that is the more accurate depiction of the poor - took hold in painting in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Its antecedents included the Pre-Raphaelites with their mantra of 'truth to nature' and the magazine *Illustrated London News*, which published woodcuts of the starving Irish following the potato famine of the late 1840s. However, for the majority of the century, in landscape art, the idyllic trumped the real.

Jefferies and Linnell present different versions of the rural labourer. One is a polemic raging against their treatment, and the other a balm which harks back to a golden age that perhaps never was but is nevertheless a long-lasting theme in British art. The unflinching pen of Jefferies and the idyllic brush

of Linnell are in opposition. Linnell presents an imaginative and peaceful world suffused in God's bounty, where the peasants are happy in their place and grateful to be there. The function and purpose of the countryside for Linnell was to produce a pleasing image that he could sell, and, for him, profit and piety were easy bedfellows. Jefferies used his pen to condemn the system which required the labourer to work for the benefit of others and remain poor. Jefferies was writing a documentary, while Linnell was painting a fantasy.

31 A. Story, *The Life of John Linnell, Vol 1*, (London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1892) p. 308.

32 R. Jefferies, quoted in E. Thomas, *Richard Jefferies, His Life and Work* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1909) p. 58.

33 R. Jefferies, quoted in E. Thomas, *Richard Jefferies, His Life and Work*, p. 202.

34 J. Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) p. 3.

35 S. F. Eisenman (Ed.), *Nineteenth Century Art: A Critical History, 3rd edn* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007) p. 224.

36 Payne, *Toil and Plenty*, p. 21.

37 Wood, *Paradise Lost*, p. 58.

38 Owens, *Spirit of Place*, p. 218.

39 R. Jefferies, 'One of the New Voters', *Manchester Guardian*, 24 January 1885.

40 G. Eliot, 'The Natural History of German Life,' *Westminster Review*, July 1856, new series, vol X.