



# C. W. Jefferys

*an alien astray in an inexplicable world*

*by Bob Truman*

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THE NORTH YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
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WITH SPECIAL APPRECIATION TO BOB TRUEMAN

*To Anthony, my nephew special  
favorite nephew.  
with love.*

C.W. JEFFERYS

AN ALIEN ASTRAY IN AN INEXPLICABLE WORLD

BY

BOB TRUEMAN

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*Contemporary art and literature, the news of the day, and even much of human history make me feel that I am an alien astray in an inexplicable world. The sequence of art and consequence I can follow, but the motives that impel mankind escape my understanding, the springs of action seem often so unreasonable that they produce a feeling of profound isolation, an overwhelming sense of strangeness of the conditions of existence in which I find myself. Is this peculiar to my temperament, or is it a feeling common to all human beings and underlying all human thought?*

C. W. Jefferys

*Henry Bee*

## C. W. JEFFERYS

“The history of a country is to be read not only in its written or printed records. These, while of the greatest value and importance, do not tell us all that we desire to know. Old buildings, early furniture, tools, vehicles, weapons and clothing, contemporary pictures of people, places and events must be examined to fill out the story.”

C.W. Jefferys,  
*The Picture Gallery of Canadian History, vol. 1*

To thousands of Canadian school children of the 1950s and 60s no one was better adept at filling out the story of their country than Charles William Jefferys. His illustrations and sketches filled the history and social studies books of the time. The very popular three volume set, *The Picture Gallery of Canadian History*, occupied the shelves of many school and home libraries. He was *the* visual interpreter of our history. Through his eyes and pen we became familiar with the country's explorers, with its Native peoples, and more importantly, with its settlers, their homes and their lives.

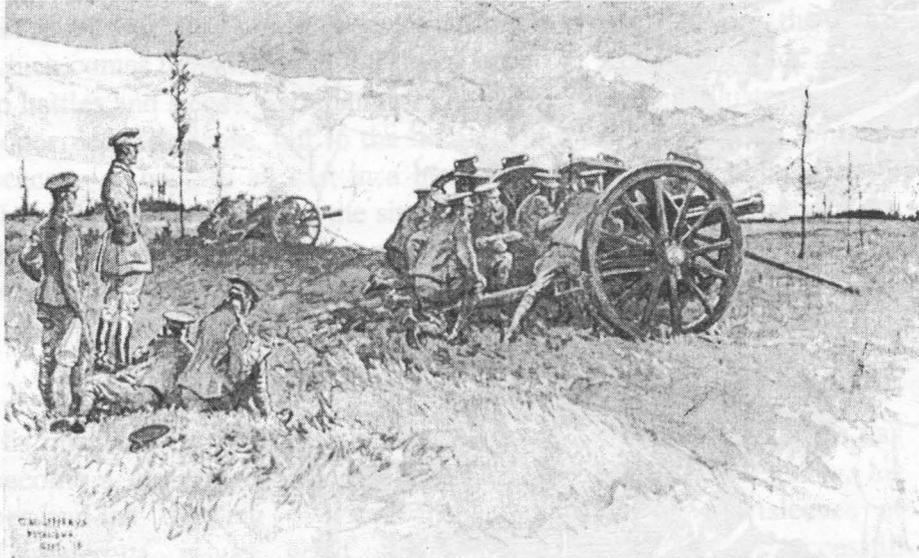
As C.W. Jefferys would write, “I suppose I should declare that I was duly and legally born, and that I acquired the rudiments of education.” Born in 1869 in Rochester, Kent, England, a neighbour of author Charles Dickens, he came to Canada with his parents in 1880 and settled in Toronto three years later where he attended various public schools where his notebook illustrations inspired classmates to pay him a penny for illustrating theirs, and he often did chalkboard history illustrations to decorate the classroom.

At age fifteen, he “set to work seriously at drawing”. His father apprenticed him to a lithographer who later “rented” him to *The Globe* as an illustrator. He began to study drawing with artist G.A. Reid who left for England a year later, and by the time he was 19 he was a member of the Toronto Art Students’ League, where he learned the essentials of painting in water colour and was being recognised as a talented and up-and-coming artist. For a few years, not finding steady work in Toronto, Jefferys moved to the United States to become an illustrator for the *New York Herald* detailing the events of the day for the paper’s readership. On his first assignment, he was sent to sketch a fire in Brooklyn. He sketched at the fire, and stayed up all that night working on it, then took it in to the editor the next morning only to learn that the paper was already out on the street. The editor thought he showed promise, and “agreed to take him on”. He learned to draw quickly to meet the deadlines and that, he believed, was the source of the character evident in his work . . . from all those people he drew.

In 1901, following the untimely deaths of his first wife, Jeanette, and two sons, Jefferys returned with his five-year old daughter to Canada, settling in Toronto again.

He was beginning to see that his future, artistically and financially, lay with his sketching and painting of scenes and items of historical interest. Although he would not pass up the opportunity to illustrate books and magazine articles, his real success was found in interpreting the past of his adopted country.

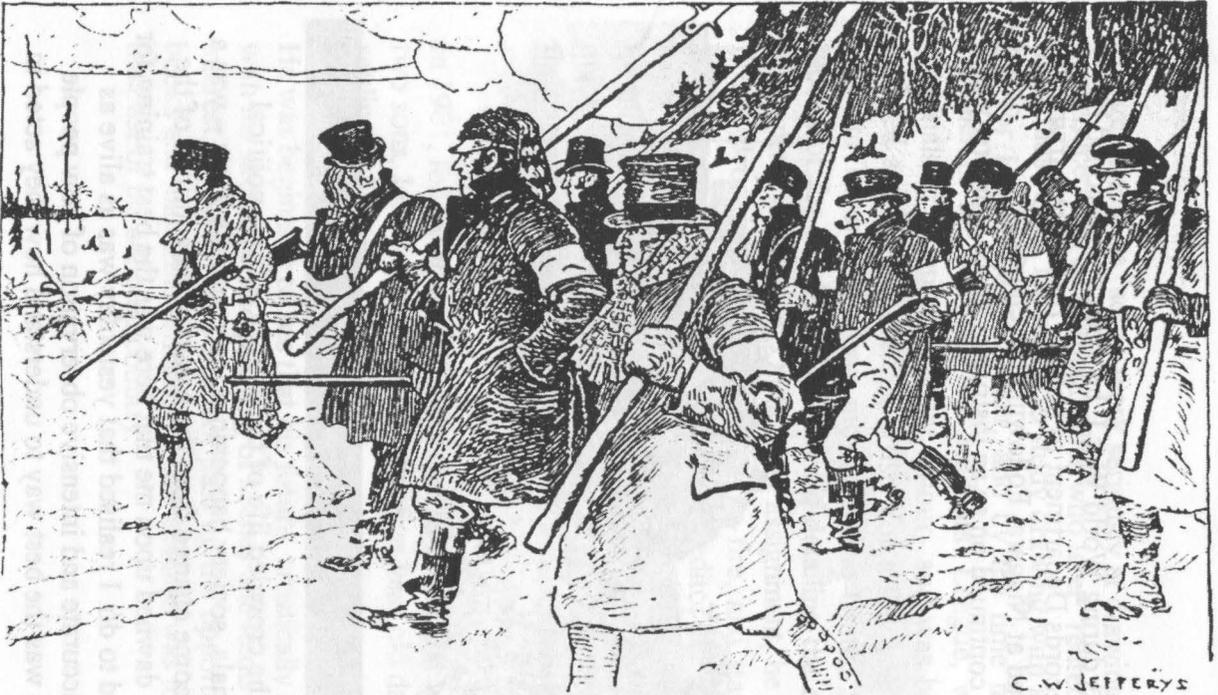
Unable to go overseas during World War I, he was commissioned by the Canadian War Records Department to portray the soldiers training at Camp Petawawa and at Niagara. Following the end of this commission, Jefferys continued on as an instructor at the University of Toronto.



85th Battery at Firing Practice by C.W. Jefferys (8251)  
© Canadian War Museum

“ The depiction of the crowded life of the Present – fires, political meetings, murder trials, society happenings, ceremonials, riots – was a startling and unwelcome change from the romantic imaginings of the Past. Before long it dawned upon me that here was the best training for the job that I wanted to do. I realised that yesterday was as alive as today and that the accurate and intensive observation of how people acted now and here was the best way to understand how they acted in the past.”

Jefferys book jacket,  
*The Picture Gallery of Canadian History, vol. 3*



REBELS MARCHING DOWN YONGE STREET  
TO ATTACK TORONTO, DECEMBER, 1837

To the names in a history book - the explorers, generals, politicians - Jefferys gave a face and a character. More often his heroes were the common men and women struggling as emigrant settlers in an untamed wilderness, the farmers, voyageurs, hunters, and rebels.

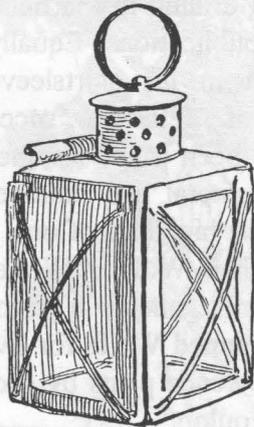
His publisher, Dr. Lorne Pierce explained, "One finds that the word which comes most frequently to mind is heroic. This applies not merely to battles and sieges, and many of Dr. Jefferys greatest illustrations are concerned with these, but to the heroic and the courageous in times of peace. . . They are all cast in a heroic mould. There is nothing petty about them. . . . Whatever the situation - ironical, heroic, humorous, or the common-place - the moment chosen is the moment above all others that is significant or typical and should be remembered."

Introduction,  
*The Picture Gallery of Canadian History, vol. 3*

His image of the reformers of Upper Canada drilling in the fields has become a classic, reproduced in numerous publications. Equally, his pen-and-ink drawing of General Montcalm in his shirtsleeves at Ticonderoga is as good an example of Jeffrey's successful "capture-the-moment" attitude as any. It had been a hot summer day and an old chronicler noted that the great general had removed his doublet. Jefferys seized on that and made it the highlight of one of his finest efforts. Montcalm he admired more than Wolfe. "Wolfe was lucky," he would say. "Montcalm was the only general in history to whip the British four times. He could have whipped Wolfe for five out of five if a fool governor had not upset his defence plans by ordering the guard back from the head of the Anse de Foulon."

His deep feeling of respect for the Native peoples of the country can be seen in the many sensitive illustrations of their daily lives. He spoke most passionately of the First Nations peoples, when, in 1951 he was quoted in Mayfair magazine, "the (Iroquois) Confederation, headed by the Mohawks, was the most remarkable military machine, man for man, in all history. Why, why, why, don't we do something about this exciting bit of history? . . . Here we have five whole nations transplanted from their original hunting grounds, and coming to live with us in Ontario. They came voluntarily to settle on the Grand River. We robbed them of their lands and left them to eke out an existence on a reserve."

Impressed with his portrayal of the aboriginal peoples, the Mohawks made Jefferys an honorary chief at Brantford, Ontario and the name Ga-re-wa-ga-yon meaning "Historical Words" was given him. He considered this one of his highest honours.



Before Jefferys would commit his images to paper, he conducted arduous research. According to Dr. Pierce, "He insisted on going over battlefields, tracing the ruins of Louisbourg and Fort Ste. Marie on the spot, returning to old grist mills to check machinery again, searching farm house attics for old lanterns, cradles or carriage lamps.

Publicly challenged in the *Toronto Star* by his friend, the humorist and economist Stephen Leacock to justify why a certain type of pistol was depicted in the hands of Maisonneuve in one of his characteristically dramatic drawings, Jefferys' responded, "Mr. Leacock puts Maisonneuve's pistol to my head and bids me stand and deliver the truth as to whether it was a flint-lock, as in my drawing." In a personal letter to Leacock, although admitting no one knew for sure, Jefferys gave his rationale for the Governor of New France likely using such a firearm. Writing from his home in Old Brewery Bay, June, 1930, Leacock replied privately to Jefferys' response, before it was printed in the newspaper, "Your *Star* letter is beautiful. By all means publish it and if you like I will presently retract it [the accusation] as a matter of fact without even looking it up. I am sure that Oliver Cromwell's people (1642-1680) used flint lock pistols."



MAISONNEUVE'S FIGHT WITH THE INDIANS

In 1941 when Leacock completed his own story of the making of Canada entitled *Canada, The Foundations of Its Future*, Jefferys was a major contributing artist.

It was his meticulous research that led Jefferys to be offered the position of chief historical consultant in the reconstruction of Champlain's Habitation at Port Royal in Nova Scotia. Although he never learned to speak it, he taught himself French so he could read the numerous historic documents and references.



CHAMPLAIN  
BUILDS  
PORT ROYAL

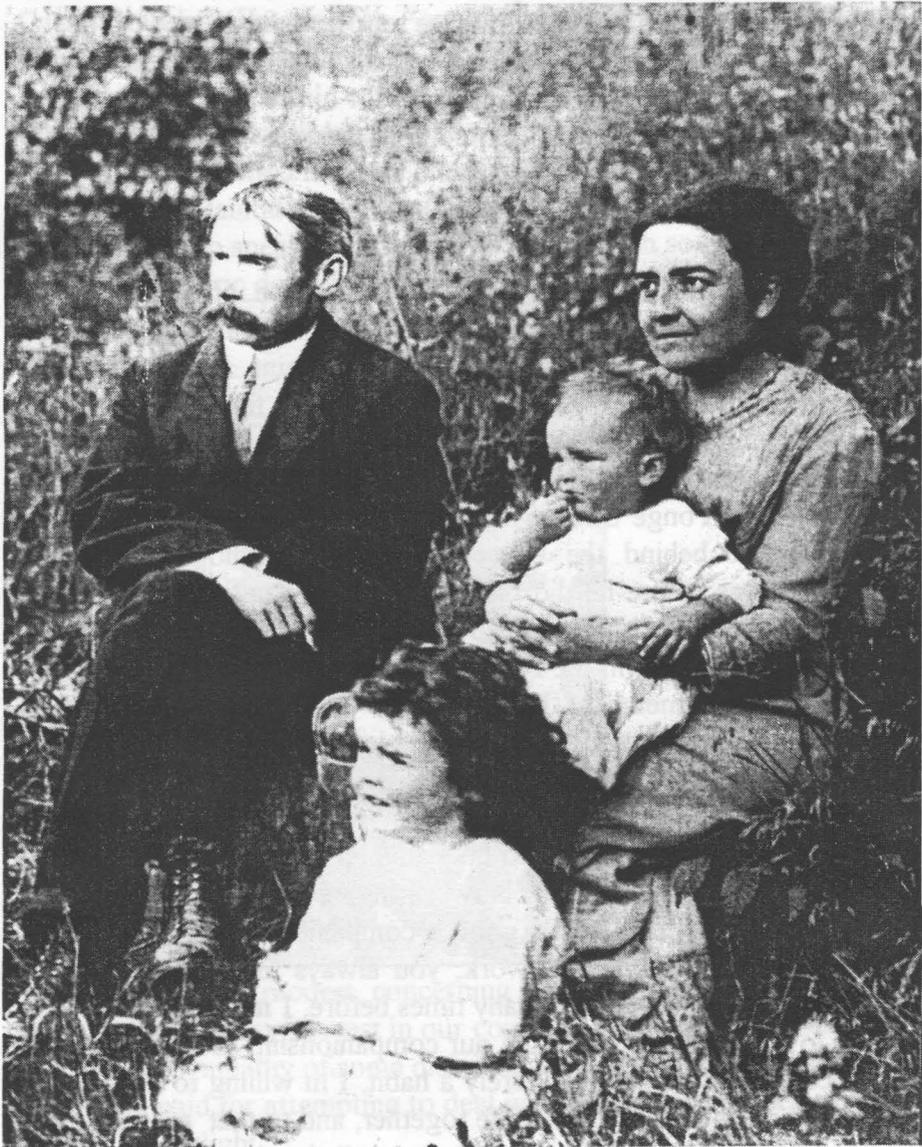
He was proud, yet modest, concerning his accomplishments. "If my work has stirred any interest in our country and its past, and won the respect and sympathy of some discriminating people like yourself, I am more than paid for attempting to deal with such inspiring themes, which in itself is a delight."

Jefferys in letter to Lorne Pierce,  
Dec.31,1929

His many accomplishments were recognised when Queen's University awarded Jeffreys an honorary LL.D. in 1931. His artistic accomplishments\* are what dominate our remembrances of him since his death in 1951. But Jefferys was also a writer, and putting words to paper seemed an easy exercise for him. His notes, letters, published and unpublished essays, lectures and literary ramblings are now part of the Art Gallery of Ontario's archival collection and offer an insight into the many aspects of the man.

In 1907 he married Clara (Callie) West and the couple had four daughters. While Jefferys travelled the country in search of historical accuracy or retired to his studio to sketch or paint, Callie raised the girls, acted as his business manager and kept the family intact. They spent two summer holidays at the old hotel in the quiet rural village of York Mills, where they decided to settle permanently in 1910 in a red brick house on Yonge Street which they rented, and later purchased. The barn/stable behind the house became his studio and research centre. This was where he did his sketches and paintings. The studio was heated by a wood stove and no children were allowed to enter the cramped quarters. Yet, in the evenings when Jefferys was at home, his daughter Betsy remembers him drawing while the girls did their homework, all seated together around the lamp-lit table. It wasn't until the 1920's that electricity replaced the oil lamps.

It is in his letters to Callie and to his daughters that one finds a gentle reflectiveness and a deep, appreciative caring. " You see, my dear girl, you've spoiled me. You're too good a companion, and except during some periods of concentrated work, you always fit in so well that I want you around. As I've said many times before, I'm afraid we're very much in love with each other, and our companionship shows no sign so far as I can see, of becoming merely a habit. I'm willing to do without you for awhile, if it will help our life together, and to that extent I think this trip has justified itself. But I want you all the time and I miss the



Charles and Callie Jefferys, Katharine and baby Betsy in York Mills, 1913

children and all the familiar things that have made my life so full and happy. I must end this, will write you from Jasper, and will hope to find letters waiting for me at Edmonton on my return. Give my love, some of it, to the children. All the rest is for yourself.

Your husband.”

Letter to Callie, Aug. 1, 1924

Jefferys used an “&” instead of “and” in his letters

There is also evidence of a vicious sense of humour, some might call it sarcasm, in his letters home to Callie: “ Jasper is no place to paint, although doubtless somewhere within the limits of the Park there are good subjects. [Lawren] Harris and [A. Y.] Jackson are not overly enthusiastic, though they found some material above the timber line near Maligne Lake, but they characterise much of the landscape as picture post card type. This is true, though scarcely fair to the scenery which after all exists for other purposes than O. S. A. [Ontario Society of Artists] exhibitions.”

Letter to Callie,

Aug. 5, 1924 , Jasper Park Lodge

Indeed, it was the prairies that opened the world to him; he felt hemmed in by the mountains. Jefferys journeyed by train across Canada during the early 1900s as an official illustrator for Canadian magazines and played a key role in the "imaginative as well as the documentary mapping of the West". His four visits to the west, which he described as a country of “mingled grace and austerity”, were spent sketching the building of the railroads, researching battlefields in Saskatchewan and Alberta and wandering the frontier towns of the plains. Jefferys was the first artist to perceive the unique character of prairie landscape“... that has no striking topographical shapes, that consists of earth, sky, space, light air, reduced to their simplest elements and baldest features. In this severe austerity, the grasses, the flowers, the shrubs, claim our attention, attract the eye and assert their individual charms. Vision

becomes subtly discriminating, compares hues, tones, colours, all of them within a narrow range of what the artist calls values; yet under this compulsory and refined analysis, revealing an astonishing variety..."

Jefferys was a pragmatist, with a sense of reality which would fit nicely into today's world, "I never give advice – I find the responsibility for myself about all I can manage. And one's own experience isn't much use to another. I shan't inflict either upon you, but will merely venture an 'opinion' or two which you are to feel at perfect liberty to disagree with or to disregard; but you know that, however stupid or formal the words may be, I wish with all my heart, that anything I could say might help you to the philosophy that for the time being has taken a vacation. One has to wrestle these things out for one's self, and all that a friend can do is to stand by, and now and then throw in a word of encouragement."

Letter to Callie,  
Feb. 8, 1906

Callie died in 1937. Jefferys continued to work in the studio behind his Yonge Street home and one of his daughters, Betsy, and her husband, moved in to help him. It was also the time when his long-time publisher Ryerson Press, and its editor, Dr. Lorne Pierce, began to assemble what was to be his legacy, the three-volume *The Picture Gallery of Canadian History*, 620 pages, 2,000 drawings, text and historical notes covering 250 years of Canadian history. The first volume appeared in 1942, the final one in 1950, one year before his death.

Charles and Callie Jefferys, Katharine and baby Betsy in York Mills, 1913

After 50 years, there are still many who know his illustrations and admire his artistic ability to recreate the country's past. Jefferys' drawings appear and reappear in texts, pamphlets and magazines throughout the country. His many illustrations are part of the collection of the National Archives of Canada in Ottawa; his letters were recently given to the Art Gallery of Ontario. His home on Yonge Street still stands, the studio over the barn long gone, surrounded by office buildings, slightly relocated because of the construction of the Yonge subway, still occupied by daughter Betsy. There is an historical marker in front to acknowledge its former occupant. A Toronto high school in the former City of North York is named in his honour. The grade 8 history curriculum of the Province of Ontario recognises his artistic contributions when it states as an expectation, "students will identify references made to Canada's historical development in Canadian art and music (e.g., sketches by C.W. Jefferys) . . ."

His good friend Lorne Pierce best summed up the life and the contributions of C. W. Jefferys when he stated in *The Picture Gallery of Canadian History, Vol. 3*: "No Canadian is more secure in the affection of both English and French in this country, or more certain of an abiding place in the history of Canada, a history which he has done so much to interpret, adorn and make alive again."

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