

THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

RICHARD JEFFERIES
AFTER LONDON



With an introduction by
JOHN FOWLES

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After London

OR

Wild England

IN TWO PARTS

I. THE RELAPSE INTO BARBARISM

II. WILD ENGLAND

With an Introduction by

JOHN FOWLES

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INTRODUCTION

After London, or Wild England must count as the strangest book that Richard Jefferies ever wrote, if not the strangest from any considerable writer of his period. This is not because it is set in the future, a device for which there was a growing vogue all through the 1870s and 1880s, but because of the very odd and paradoxical future it proposes. The strangeness is increased by the book's bizarre construction and its ambivalences; its surface may seem limpid enough, but its depths are obscure and its sources, its relationship to Jefferies' other work, obscurer still. And strangest of all is the fact that it should be the supposedly 'sensitive' nature writer, author in 1883 of a passionate explosion, *The Story of My Heart*, against machine thinking and machine society, who two years later portrays the miseries of a future world bereft of higher knowledge and technology.

Doubt of tool-making man, and of the brave new worlds he constructs with his tools, was already a familiar current in Victorian thought. One of the most famous manifestations of this suspicion of the machine, and especially of the arch-machine of Darwinian theory, was Samuel Butler's *Erewhon*. Although that appeared in 1872, seemingly thirteen years before *After London*, we now know that this is an illusion of publication date. The real interval between the two books is very much closer. I do not know if Jefferies read *Erewhon* or another very successful essay more strictly in the 'tale of the future' genre of two years earlier, Bulwer Lytton's *The Coming Race*; but in retrospect his own book does sound singularly like a riposte to these two widely discussed works.

The most famous Utopian 'child' of *Erewhon* was William Morris's *News from Nowhere*, of 1890; and on Morris it is beyond doubt that *After London* had a considerable and far-reaching effect. He read it very soon after it came out, and wrote his first

impressions to Mrs. Burne-Jones on 28 April 1885. Though he found the story 'queer', he went on to say that 'absurd hopes curled round my heart as I read it. I rather wish I was thirty years younger: I want to see the game played out'. The nature of the game is revealed in another letter to the painter's wife of a fortnight later.

'I have no more faith than a grain of mustard seed in the future history of "civilization", which I *know* now is doomed to destruction, probably before very long: what a joy it is to think of! and how often it consoles me to think of barbarism once more flooding the world, and real feelings and passions, however rudimentary, taking the place of our wretched hypocrisies.' Needless to say, the disillusioned socialist speaks here. If he thoroughly approved the catastrophic side of the 'queer' book, Morris must equally have hated the notion that a return to the conditions of the past was a return to something much worse than the present. To a man who believed that medieval artifacts represented medieval social reality, this was gross heresy. Literary influence works quite as much by antipathy as by agreement, and Morris duly retreated, for his answer, into the sweet old dream of the universal commune.

Whatever their debts to one another in terms of influence, these three books, *Erewhon*, *After London*, and *News from Nowhere*, stand in a class of their own as witnesses, through fantasy, to the central terror of their age: the spectre of determinism. There are three main reasons why *After London* is the least known. I am quite certain that it is the most imaginative; but it is also the most darkly personal and (at least outwardly) the most pessimistic. Even more damagingly for itself, and as with so much of Jefferies' writing, it is quintessentially a *feeling* about a situation, neither a clear analysis nor a clear prescription, and is therefore set firmly across the grain of both nineteenth- and twentieth-century scientific and literary 'good form' in this country. Jefferies speaks, in connection with his hero Felix Aquila, of 'that unutterable distance between him and other men'; he could as well have been speaking of himself and other writers and social thinkers.

Neither Butler nor Morris leaves us in any doubt about what he hopes or fears; but it is quite possible to end *After London* in all sorts of puzzlement; even worse, to conclude that the book is a kind of bastard medieval romance or, in terms of Jefferies' own work, a remake—and no more successful than most such ventures—of his fictional masterpiece, *Bevis*. Both these conclusions are deeply mistaken.

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Though *After London* was published in 1885, one can search the *Notebooks* (Jefferies' diaries, edited and published by Samuel Looker in 1948) in vain in the immediately preceding years for any but the most exiguous reference to its writing—in contradistinction to all other Jefferies' novels of the 1880s, for which ideas and working notes abound. The sole direct mention is curt and commercial, and concerns the signing of the agreement for the book with Cassell on 21 January 1885. This offered their standard advance to less successful authors of £100 against a royalty of £75 per 1,000 copies sold above 1,500. The book ('in no sense a novel, more like a romance', wrote Jefferies about this time) came out at the very beginning of April, and there were further impressions in the two succeeding years; Cassell also issued an American edition in 1885. It was quite extensively reviewed in London, the general verdict being that the first section of the book, describing the relapse of England, after an astronomical catastrophe, into barbarism, and the later journey into the dead heart of London, were 'fresh' and 'striking' pieces of writing; but that the portrayal of Felix Aquila in the second half of the book was a failure.

Most of the reviewers also complained about the ambiguous ending. The *Westminster* critic suggested that it belonged to 'a class of books of which there have been many examples of late' and then went on (with a very poor guess as to literary taste in time to come) to dismiss the whole category: 'Tales of the future can be but simple *jeux d'esprit*, or else mere vehicles for satire on

the present.' Another reviewer, with the leaden-footed sarcasm beloved of his kind, mocked the implausibility of the basic idea, and announced that he could not 'see the fun' in it.

It must be confessed that a sense of humour is not a salient feature in Jefferies' character; and we can hardly blame those first reviewers for failing to realize that *After London* is no mere piece of early science fiction, but an attempt to convey, in terms of a parable, both the dominant experience of the writer's inner life and the kernel of his philosophy of man. Yet *After London* cannot be properly judged until this is understood—and that in turn cannot be done until the stream is traced back to its source.

The reason references to the book are so rare in the 1880s diaries is simple: it had been first conceived much earlier. Its main draft seems to have been written in 1882—Jefferies said in a letter of 1885 that the manuscript had been completed three years earlier; and on 2 April 1884, he told C. J. Longman that he had 'just put the finishing touches to my new book'. But he added that it was in three volumes, and seemingly in this last year before publication he cut the three-volume version heavily, perhaps at Cassell's request.

Samuel Looker possessed 'very early' drafts of the novel, and there are clear references to the general theme of relapse in the 1878 diary. Two such drafts that have been published are *Backwoods*, a short version of the first part of *After London* and dated by Jefferies himself to 20 October 1879; and *The Great Snow*,* a fascinating sketch of an alternative catastrophe, dated by Looker to 'probably' before 1875. Another little-read Jefferies novel, *World's End*, published in 1877, opens with a number of strong echoes of *After London*, including the characteristic device of a city having its fate decided by a kind of geological constipation—though in this case the destiny of London in the present novel is reversed. The monstrous city of 'Stürmingham' rises out of a swamp caused by a water-rat accidentally damming a stream. This long-storing of subject is very characteristic of Jefferies. The first note for

*Added as an appendix to this edition.

Amaryllis at the Fair (1887) predates publication by eleven years, and the first draft of *The Dewy Morn* was written six years before it appeared in 1884.

But the great question-mark on the more fantastic side of Jefferies' fiction has always lain over a text called *The Rise of Maximin*. It is first mentioned in a letter of 9 October 1874 to Thomas Hardy's publisher, William Tinsley, who earlier that year had put out (as with Hardy, partly at the writer's expense) Jefferies' first novel, *The Scarlet Shawl*. Jefferies speaks of 'a book of adventure on a novel plan', which is already finished. 'I don't think anything of the kind has been written before. It describes the rise to power of an intelligent man in a half-civilized country, and is called *The Rise of Maximin*'. Looker correctly guessed that *Maximin* must have been related to *After London*, but assumed (Tinsley was not interested) that the text had long disappeared. He was wrong. In the last few years Mr. Hugoe Matthews and Mr. John Pearson have independently discovered that this 'lost' text was in fact serialized in 1876 and 1877. It throws important new light not only on *After London*, but on how Jefferies' imagination functioned in general.

The Rise of Maximin is in almost every way a tyro's novel, but it is unmistakably a first attempt at *After London*—and also at *Bevis*. It describes the career of a discontented, sensitive, headstrong young gentleman (eternal Bevis, though given the same age as Felix Aquila, twenty-five years), who after a series of battles and adventures in a mythical land and past becomes an emperor. It is written, like the first part of *After London*, in pseudo-annal style, and is virtually without dialogue. It is all action: fighting, marching, exploring, desperate straits. The setting in time and place is that of an omnivorous imagination run wild, with an astounding confusion of echoes in name and description, ranging from occident to orient, from classical times through the feudal period to seventeenth-century warfare. Not all the invented names are happy. Maximin's chief conquest is of a country called Talkistan, bad enough in itself, but even worse when we learn that its fierce

inhabitants are called Talcs. Elsewhere a certain Sultan Bong springs straight, like an unwanted jack-in-the-box, from Edward Lear.

Only one section, a long account of the trajet of Maximin's army across an endless desert and an evil black swamp—a vast vacuum—rises to a higher level, and foretells the magnificent evocation of dead London in the present novel. The main sources appear to be the Victorian explorers' narratives of journeys in Africa and Australia, but they are assimilated and embroidered with considerable skill; already that unique power of evoking place and mood of place is apparent.

There are many other parallels with *After London*: a similar Dark Age society where 'cruelty reigned everywhere', of petty tyrants supported by mercenaries; a similar world of stockaded farms and dangerous roads, haunted by 'Jips' (Gypsies, the Romanies of *After London*); a similar guiding girl-angel for the hero and a similar courtly-love relationship between them, and above all a similar geography, whose central feature is a huge, islanded sweet-water lake (and sanctuary) with unexplored shores.

The most striking thing about *Maximin*, to a modern reader, is its passionate, if distinctly adolescent, attempt to get away from everyday reality; that is, to fantasize oneself out of the prison of the world that is. Every novelist requires some such obsessive yearning to function, since it is the essential supplier of imaginative energy. This particular polarity, between the sense of imprisonment and the determination to escape it, remained intensely strong in Jefferies all his life, for both biographical and innate reasons. Perhaps no other writer of his time suffered more terribly from 'those treble agonies which the highly-wrought and imaginative inflict upon themselves', and they largely explain the faults and the virtues of all his writing.

Maximin represents a first headlong and uncontrolled fusion of these two forces of frustration and release; and *After London* is the gauge of how well he succeeded, in the intervening years, in controlling them—in finding an answer to the insoluble conflict

between the demands of valid private and valid public, or social, myth. Posterity has judged him more successful with the former, his private myth; yet I think myself he did a good deal better in *After London* than most critics of the novel, ancient and modern, have been prepared to grant. It was written by a far wiser man than the one who wrote *Maximin*, but Jefferies' wisdom is of a very special kind. It is neither conventional, nor cunning, nor philosophical; but something simpler and deeper, and *sui generis* in his era.

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Nothing, beyond blindness, can make of Jefferies a nature-writer of less than genius; and nothing, beyond an excess of sympathy, can make him a great novelist. Neither his highly idiosyncratic psyche ('I would write psyche always instead of soul') nor his most obvious literary talent, the first obsessed with sensation, the primacy of living experience (therefore above all his own), the second with its verbal expression, suited him for fiction; and it is no coincidence that his two most achieved and best remembered novels, *Wood Magic* and *Bevis*, are about (his own) childhood and very local worlds seen with the intensity and subjectivity of that age. Jefferies can always observe adults accurately, and sometimes in great depth; but only what they are, not what they might become. It is on the one hand a kind of natural historian's fault; on the other a kind of disbelief that adults are capable of growth and understanding.

Perhaps Jefferies half knew of this defect, as an artist. If not, it was not for lack of having it pinpointed by his contemporaries. Another in general kind reviewer of 1885 complained that 'as always, his men and women are unsatisfactory and incomplete'. He was in any case, and far more than most novelists, a willing victim of the emotional shackles of the past. The farm, the distant father-figure and the opposite-minded brother, the making of boats and weapons, the war-games, the voyage-quest, all make it quite clear that *Maximin* and *Bevis* and *Felix* are one at heart and

that all three avatars spring directly from that unassuageable inner landscape, or lost domain, of the early years at Coate Farm near Swindon; equally the principal literary influence, in all three cases, is that of the writer's favourite classic, Homer's *Odyssey*. A *Notebooks* entry of 1881 interestingly reveals that the alternative title of *After London (Wild England)* was originally assigned to *Bevis*.

My guess, and I must not claim more for it, is that Jefferies had, in attempting in 1874 to transpose a deeply personal memory of self and place into the absurdly grandiose myth of *Maximin*, fallen into a very common young novelist's trap. The very capacity to imagine other worlds encourages this fault: by nature the young novelist is always looking to go beyond present circumstance and environment. But when the other world he longs to escape to is in fact that of a lost past and reality, the attempt to transcend and universalize it—to stretch the little lake at Coate to cover the whole Thames Valley—causes a fatal dilution of the essence of the thing to be recaptured, and nine times out of ten it will disappear. A very similar French victim of this trap, Alain-Fournier, spent many years writing and rewriting *Le Grand Meaulnes* before he realized that the emotional force of the memory is closely reliant on portraying its particular and historical reality. Some such revelation must, I think, have come to Jefferies during the 1870s and early 1880s; and from the generalized and bloated setting of *Maximin* was eventually distilled the much more prosaic and satisfying (because anchored in real place and autobiography) version we know as *Bevis*. The reservoir lake was restored to size; the grand names and exotic places were returned to what they always had been, the play-material of two lively boys.

Why then was the *Maximin* or public-myth version not quietly forgotten? One obvious reason was the need for a further vehicle to expound all the more adult feelings about the way of the world that *Bevis* could not satisfy, and that *Maximin* had been too schoolboyish and unfocused to articulate. These feelings had become grim in Jefferies by the early 1880s. His increasingly

critical and despair-tinged view was partly caused by purely personal factors, by his illness (which began in 1881), his poverty and sense of failure, his sad isolation from the rest of the literary world; but it was much more importantly due, as anyone who has read *The Story of My Heart* must know, to a deep moral and emotional loathing of the self-blindness and stultifying economic and social systems of Late Victorian Britain.

It might seem that *The Story*, published in 1883, the year after *Bevis*, had said all that had had to be left out of the novel. But it is an impossible book, written at such a remove from the consecrated norms of both our thought and our literature that even today nobody knows where to place it. There are good judges who see it as nine parts hysterical and mystical vapouring; and there are others who see it as almost Einsteinian in the revolutionary boldness of its concepts—though in a field where rational and mathematical proofs will never be found.

I would place it myself on any short list of key Victorian texts, and make it prescribed reading for all science students—and not just for that one beautifully formulated prediction of radio and radar: 'Light is the darkest shadow of the sky'. But *The Story* is, so to speak, a sermon, and I have no doubt that Jefferies felt the need for a simpler statement of the price of ignoring his basic text in the pulpit: that the answer to the future lies in each individual, in what he called soul-learning, and not in attempting to turn all scientific and social clocks back. Certainly one cannot fully understand *After London* unless one reads it alongside *The Story of My Heart*. If the physical or blood relationship is with *The Rise of Maximin* and *Bevis*, the intellectual one is with the spiritual confession. They were written very close together. *The Story* was finished in June 1882; and the writing of the main draft of *After London* (its full title is first noted down on 20 October) followed.

But there are a number of other reasons why Jefferies would have wanted to rehandle *Maximin*. He must, as early as the draft of *The Great Snow*, have seen that the theme had much richer potentialities in a hypothetical future instead of a hypothetical

past; and seen, like all writers feeding off their own adolescent day-dreams, that he had made things much too easy for his first hero—that life was not like that . . . and had certainly not turned out so for the dreamer himself, in harsh reality. Maximin grown Felix is much more solitary and prone to self-defeating moods. Then it seems too that Jefferies had greatly clarified, in writing *Bevis*, the deeper symbolic values of his inner landscape. The lake plays a hugely greater part in *After London* than in *Maximin*. It becomes synonymous now with flight, refuge, release, freedom, while all on land is cruel, corrupt, imprisoning, fraught with fear and danger. Land is reality and the eternal relapse into barbarism; the lake an altogether nobler world, almost Jefferies' equivalent of Palmer's Shoreham.

But I am not sure the major reason may not have been the relief offered to a sick and tormented man (he had undergone no less than four painful operations in 1882 to relieve a fistular condition) by the prospect of once more entering that central myth of his childhood. However weak Jefferies may have been in some branches of the novelist's craft, he is a master at physical sensation and feel of place. Felix static and talking is very often uncomfortably near a stiff, pale shadow; Felix in movement, alone in the night forest, on the dawn lake, is intensely real. Jefferies' longing to live his words in these passages is almost palpable. Again and again it melts the third-person mask adopted in the narrating.

Finally a distinct tinge of violence (Jefferies seems to have partly blamed his illness on London) lay behind the need to use the theme again. It is already apparent in *The Great Snow*, and here are two revealing passages from the *Notebooks*.

That we must begin again like the Caveman. No knowledge at present of use since it does not help. We must destroy the idea of our knowing anything. We must fully acknowledge that we know nothing and begin again. (18 March 1883)

Hyde Park Demonstration.

Little Village. Mediaeval London. The Thames. Putrid black water,

decomposed human body under the paddle wheel. Deeds of darkness, the body. Nine Elms, sewn up in a sack. Children miserable, tortured, just the same. The tyranny of the nobles now paralleled by the County Court. Machinery for extortion. The sewers system and the W.C. water. The ground prepared for the Cholera plague and fever, zymotic, killing as many as the plague. The 21 parishes of the Lower Thames Sewage Scheme without any drainage at all. The whole place prepared for disease and pestilence. Cruelty of hospital system to patient and to surrounding inhabitants.

This W.C. century. (21 July 1884)

Clearly one side of Jefferies yielded nothing to Morris in terms of apocalyptic longings for the Great Purge; yet he knew far better than Morris the probable cost of it. Many have seen this putting of a losing value on both sides of the coin as mere—if not pathological—pessimism. I see it far more as honesty.

Jefferies never had time for the romantic view, then held by soft-centred middle-class intellectuals of all persuasions from socialism to Anglo-Catholicism, of rural innocence as a viable antidote to urban evil. Few, as he scornfully wrote in one of his essays, 'could long remain poetical upon bread and cheese'. (Nor did he have any general faith in the intelligentsia. The main reason England relapsed so fast into barbarism, it will be noted in *After London*, is that the educated classes had emigrated *en bloc* once the catastrophe happened.) The book damns all attempts to draw up battle-lines, or social solutions, on such simplistic and sentimental grounds. London, uncontrolled capital in both social and economic senses, is evil; but fragmented rural poverty is no better. Jefferies had seen the agricultural depression of the late seventies and early eighties at much closer hand than most of the armchair theorists.

A pox on both camps, then; the only salvation lies in the individual, or the cast of his psyche. Particularly pertinent to *After London* is what Jefferies often called 'villadom' in the *Notebooks* (and Butler Ygrundism, Grundyism, in *Erewhon*): conformity, apathy, smug narrow-mindedness. It is associated

with London there; yet it continues to infest the survivors of the annihilation of London in the novel, and plainly in Jefferies' view would not die with the urban, or suburban, society that especially fostered it. It is the unthinkingness, or rather the unfeelingness, of ordinary mankind, both town and country, both middle and lower class, that appals him—the inability to build one's own boat, however home-made, and sail for something better, outside the present (vicious) 'circle of ideas', away from that 'dust which settles on the heart'.

It is in this context that we may take a kinder view of Felix's greenness. To those who remain happy inside the circle of ideas and content to have dusty hearts he must seem a very slender reed indeed on which to build much hope for the future of man; yet there seems to be something intended in his boyishness. Jefferies is saying that age petrifies; adulthood is imprisoned in being, only youth can escape to becoming. It is his answer to the fault so many critics (not least his contemporaries) have found in him: the lack of psychological movement in adult characters, when Jefferies the observer trumps Jefferies the restless mystic. Here energy, courage, and will are all attached to a kind of perverse innocence in man. This may make a twentieth-century cynic sneer. But we now know a good deal more, in practical terms, about the problems of steering advanced societies towards sanity; and among other things that high intelligence and scientific reason, pundits and professors, seem for some mysterious reason to hamper as much as they help. They may make the course we are on a shade more pleasant in the here and now; but they have failed dismally to change it. Jefferies would say it is because they have lost all soul-life, all pagan greenness, all the Felix in themselves. Felix may be an outward child, but his underlying psychic energy, or *élan*, is vital to the species.

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We return once more to Jefferies' undisputed genius for feeling, which handicaps him both as a novelist and as a philosopher, but to my mind increasingly enhances him as a seer and moralist. I

dare say a modern science fiction reviewer might raise all sorts of quibbles, geological and biological, over the account of England a century after the catastrophe. Domesticated animals do seem to have reverted to their more primitive forms with a rather alarming rapidity; and the virtual disappearance of print and all higher forms of technology is a heavy shade too convenient for the general proposition to be very convincing.

Yet the over-all picture, helped by the plain, at times almost journalistic, style, has a strange coherence, the conviction of a life-like dream, if not of foreseeable life itself. I defy anyone who has just read the climactic passage describing Felix's perilous entry into the poisonous black morass that was once London to look out of a window in any modern overgrown city without a frisson of mortality. The vision has, like the whole book, a faintly surreal quality, of the recorded nightmare, of a near-madness . . . but a poet's madness, haunting and percipient.

One may argue over the physical plausibility of the world Jefferies envisages; but not, I think, over its metaphorical power. An irony is never far beneath the surface of the text. As the London extract I quoted from the *Notebooks* demonstrates, one did not have to return to the Dark Ages to observe the selfishness, stupidity, and injustice of Felix's world. It lay for Jefferies (and William Morris) very close outside any Victorian reader's door; and all he did was to strip it to essentials in a more primitive context. Felix's rebuffs and humiliations at the camp of King Isebard may seem extraneous to the general narrative; they are very far from extraneous to the author's view of his own society. When he says Isebard's army had 'no completeness, no system, no organisation' and that 'it was a kind of haphazardness', Jefferies is really saying why he cannot fit into his own world. Nor later, it should be noted, can he truly fit the pastoral simplicity of his shepherd-tribe's life.

In contrast to Butler and Morris, Jefferies was neither a Swiftian intellectual nor a rosy Marxist. He had very little interest in established religion or politics. His mysticism is really an extension of

his acute powers of sight and touch, his intensely physical apprehension of life; and no one labelled mystic has ever more clearly distinguished feeling from sentiment, in regard to nature. Some of his more starry-eyed later worshippers have forgotten that he enjoyed hunting and killing it for much of his life; and forgotten the adjective he coined in *The Story of My Heart* to describe all the vast part of nature outside man: 'ultra-human', that is, totally indifferent to us. By everyday character he was far more a Stoic observer, a reluctant fatalist, than a mystic; and the deepest tension in all his best work derives from the attempt to escape from that everyday character.

The inconclusive ending of *After London* has also been much criticized. Yet it seems to me entirely consistent with the underlying purpose of the novel. Firmly announcing the future will turn out well, or the reverse, may numb man's age-old terror of not knowing, and help hide his increasing lack of what Keats called negative capability; but it is not in harmony with reality. In effect Jefferies took the hardest option. The search in man for greater self-knowledge is a dangerous voyage, but far better than not to voyage at all—and even though, of its nature, destination can never lie in one place or episode . . . or static Utopia. There are no happy ends in time, or evolution. The journey can never be an arrival, only an onwardness.

The need to escape from the earth- and convention-bound haunted all Jefferies' life. As a boy he twice ran away from home, first for Moscow, then for America, and although he got no further than France in the one case, and Liverpool in the other, the instinct never died. It was transmuted in his late years into an obsession with the mechanics of flight; partly, no doubt, in answer to the agonies of a free spirit locked remorselessly into a doomed body, but quite clearly also because flight symbolized for the dying man that paramount need for mobility, or ability to marry observation and action, that lies at the heart of his philosophy, and of this book. It could not have ended in any other key.