



Mark Frost, ed. **Richard Jefferies *After London; Or Wild England***. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2018, 247 pp. Hb £80. ISBN: 978-1474402392; Pb £19.99 ISBN: 978-1474441315.

reviewed by **James Hamby**

Mark Frost's edition of Richard Jefferies's *After London; Or Wild England* situates this work both within the contexts of nineteenth-century British literature and within contemporary literary criticism. This novel, which says so much about the state of the society in which it was written, is startlingly current with our own time, especially in terms of discussions about the Anthropocene. Frost's edition is timely as it thrusts into the forefront a narrative ripe for rediscovery in the twenty-first century. It is not only a pioneering work of science fiction or ecocriticism, but it is a penetrating exploration of human nature, of humanity's relationship to nature, and of what happens when society collapses and all of our modern comforts and safeguards are taken away: mainly, Jefferies suggests, nothing good. While some individuals and communities in this novel practice compassion in the face of hostility and ingenuity at the threat of deprivation, most others lapse into ignorance and barbarity. Frost's edition frames and comments upon the text with a highly enlightening introduction, footnotes throughout the text, and two appendices comprised of shorter works by Jefferies.

After London is a unique, genre-bending novel that defies easy categorization. In his introduction, Frost writes "Jefferies unsettles by invoking catastrophe; by intelligently declining to offer a clear explanation of 'the event' that led to London's demise; but also, and more profoundly, by refusing to provide an idyll in the *tabula rasa* created by the novel's opening" (vii). This observation demonstrates the richness and complexity of Jefferies's novel. To begin with, Frost discusses Jefferies's background as a writer of nature and agriculture. He then follows by examining all the different genres that serve as a lens through which to view the novel. Frost identifies several deferent genres within sf into which the novel may be classified, including dystopia, neo-medievalism, Darwinian novel, romance, experimental novel, and anti-pastoral novel.

Out of all these designations, Frost's observations about the work as an anti-pastoral work are perhaps the most insightful. Frost notes that "the nineteenth-century is particularly fertile ground for pastoral because of accelerated urbanisation, industrialisation, and social change" (xli). Unlike William Morris's *News from Nowhere*, the return to nature in *After London* is not accompanied by harmony with the natural world and peaceful co-existence amongst nations; it instead portrays a "rapid evolutionary development" of a "unyielding and dangerous state" that demonstrates "a further destabilization of belief in the possibility of harmony between humanity and environment" (xlii). Frost successfully demonstrates how this complex text fits into a number of different literary genres and represents many of the social fears and debates of its time.

The two appendices Frost includes, "The Great Snow" and "Undated MS ['Alone in London']", provide excellent context for *After London* within Jefferies's literary oeuvre and worldview. "The Great Snow" tells the story from a Londoner's perspective of a ferocious blizzard that blankets Britain in several feet of snow and causes society to grind to a halt. This story shares with *After London* similar themes of the destruction of society, of humanity's helplessness when faced with unforgiving nature, and of society's easy readiness to resort to barbarism once the conveniences of technology have been swept away. What differs in this short story from *After London*, however, is that we see the destruction of society as it is happening instead of being told about it as a historical event. This difference allows readers to see the rapidity with which humanity devolves to barbarity and consequently suggests just how fragile civilization really is.

The second story, a fragment, explores the psychology of a young man who feels alienated from the hordes of Londoners who surround him. As a gentlemanly youth who does not work, he feels as though he is drifting aimlessly in the sea of the purpose-driven throngs surrounding him. He says, "I am the only man in London who is not quite decided. Everyone else has fully made up his mind and knows exactly what he is going to do" (199). When reading this description of a young man who does not fit in, it is easy to think of Felix, whose intelligence and sensitivity lead him to feel profoundly alienated from the world around him. In this young Londoner's distress at being so isolated from the ebb and flow of humanity, one can see the despair that drove Felix to his solitary journey across the lake, and the pain he must have felt whenever he was unable to make meaningful connections with the people around him. These appendices reveal Jefferies's views on society and the individual, and on humanity's struggle, both collectively and personally, to carve out meaning in a world that is hostile on multiple fronts.

In all, Frost's edition of *After London* is a timely addition to the Edinburgh Critical Editions of Nineteenth-Century Texts series. The novel's focus on humanity's relationship to nature calls to mind our future in the Anthropocene. Will our society adapt to a more eco-friendly existence, or will we be forced to revert to a more uncivilized existence, as Jefferies envisioned for a disaster-stricken world? The neo-medieval future Jefferies imagined is of course unlikely, but we may be forced into a more hostile global community where nations compete for resources and where we all must learn to do without the technologies and comforts we have come to take for granted, as the British in *After London* have to do.

This volume should be of interest to both general readers and scholars, particularly those interested in ecocriticism, nineteenth-century medievalism, and the Victorian roots of sf literature. The scholarly introduction at the beginning provides excellent context for the book, and makes it ideal for both undergraduate and graduate courses. There is no doubt that this edition may fit in with a wide variety of classes, from Victorian studies to ecocriticism. Moreover, this text serves to show how enduring Victorian sf is and how much it has to say about our current condition and our future.

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