

Richard Jefferies and Victorian Science Fiction

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Whether as a result of civil unrest, sweeping epidemics, economic collapse, foreign invasion or natural disaster, the Victorians were stalked by a fear of catastrophe. The pursuit of material values, even worldly success itself, seemed somehow to invite it. "Shall the Parthenon be in ruins on its rock — but these mills of yours be the consummation of the buildings of the earth, and their wheels be as the wheels of eternity?" asked Ruskin at the end of "Traffic," an address given at Bradford in 1864. "Catastrophe will come," he thundered, "or worse than catastrophe, slow mouldering and withering into Hades."

Among those who embodied this fear of catastrophe in fiction were George Chesney, author of *The Battle of Dorking: Reminiscences of a Survivor* (1871), who describes England as totally unprepared to confront the threat of German militarism, and H.G. Wells, whose *War of the Worlds* (1898) is written in the same kind of documentary style, and shows Surrey suburbanites caught equally unawares by Martian invaders. For his "scientific romances," and particularly for introducing aliens, Wells is hailed as the father of modern science fiction.

However, Richard Jefferies's *After London; or Wild England* predates *The War of the Worlds* by more than a decade. Published in 1885, it describes the ecological repercussions of some unspecified disaster, and posits a return to barbarism. England's lost towns have spewed out their mice and rats, pets and domestic animals have perished or reverted to a few wild breeds, and the overgrown countryside is now populated by lurking savages: Bushmen, Romanies and "foot gypsies." Descendants of the "ancients" live an embattled existence in settlements around a great inland lake, but little of the old civilisation remains: "There are few books, and still fewer to read them; and these are all in manuscript, for though the way to print is not lost, it is not employed since no one wants books" (Chaper 4). Although Jefferies did not foresee the space age, his novel is pioneering in another way, as an inspiration for the post-apocalyptic genre of science fiction.

Jefferies was influenced by Ruskin, to whom he refers, for example, in *The Open Air* (1885) and *Field and Hedgerow* (1889); his scenario is much closer than Wells's to the one Ruskin had warned of, and more alarming. After all, the Martians in *The War of the Worlds* are finally conquered by earth's bacteria, and London recovers. It is as busy as ever again by the end. Jefferies, on the other hand, grants it no reprieve. When his young hero, Sir Felix Aquila, makes a voyage of exploration across the inland lake, he reaches a putrid swamp which gives off noxious fumes. At one point, he traverses the marshy area on foot, hoping to find water to drink. Then, still parched with thirst, he returns to his canoe via the imprints of some skeletons which he had passed before:

The subtle poison of the emanations from the earth had begun to deaden his nerves. It seemed a full hour or more to him until he reached the spot where the skeletons were drawn in white upon the ground.

He passed a few yards to one side of them, and stumbled over a heap of something which he did not observe, as it was black like the level ground. It emitted a metallic sound, and looking he saw that he had kicked his foot against a great heap of money. The coins were black as ink; he picked up a handful and went on. Hitherto, Felix had accepted all that he saw as something so strange as to be unaccountable. During his advance into this region in the canoe he had in fact become slowly stupefied by the poisonous vapour he had inhaled. His mind was partly in abeyance; it acted, but only after some time had elapsed. He now at last began to realise his position; the finding of the heap of blackened money touched a chord of memory. These skeletons were the miserable relics of men who had ventured, in search of ancient treasures, into the deadly marshes over the site of the mightiest city of former days. The deserted and utterly extinct city of London was under his feet.

He had penetrated into the midst of that dreadful place, of which he had heard many a tradition: how the earth was poison, the water poison, the air poison, the very light of heaven, falling through such an atmosphere, poison. There were said to be places where the earth was on fire and belched forth sulphurous fumes, supposed to be from the combustion of enormous stores of strange and unknown chemicals collected by the wonderful people of those times. Upon the surface of the water there was a greenish-yellow oil, to touch which was death to any creature; it was the very essence of corruption. . . . [Chapter 23]

With what techniques, and how successfully, does Jefferies relate moral and physical corruption here? Compare this description with Ruskin's linkage of the "plague-wind" and "moral gloom" in "The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century" (a lecture given just a year before *After London* appeared). How might Felix's response to the scene heighten the effect on the reader? How relevant is the description to modern concerns?

Unlike the unfortunate foragers who had preceded him, Felix survives, and aims at the end to establish a kind of feudal utopia in another, idyllically rural, spot which he discovers. While it is rooted in Jefferies's own love of "Ancient Time," this aspect of his work also owes much to Ruskin, and is very much of the period: consider the medievalism of the Pre-Raphaelites, and Arts and Crafts organisations like the the Guild and School of Handicrafts. Whether Felix's venture succeeds or not is unknown, but the element of hope is enough for *After London*, despite its nightmarish vision of the submerged capital, to be classed as an early example of the "cosy catastrophe" subgenre. This is a term invented by Brian Aldiss in *Billion Year Spree: The History of Science Fiction* (1973) with reference to John Wyndham.

Jefferies had a personal reason for writing so vindictively about London. He seems to have blamed the city for his declining health. Moreover, he was writing at the time of the so-called Great Depression of 1873-1896. Like many lovers of the English countryside, he held London at least partly responsible for destroying the old ways of life there. Others who have swamped London in their work include Grant Allen, whose *Strand Magazine* story of December 1897, "The Thames Valley Catastrophe," describes a fiery flood of volcanic lava spewing over the

area. "There was no more London," he says emphatically. More recently, J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962) depicts London as submerged under a vast tropical swamp infested with iguanas, giant mosquitoes and so on. The protagonist, Dr Kerans, turns away from efforts to reclaim and loot the city, and heads south into the unreclaimed jungle. Compare and contrast the ambiguous endings of *After London* and *The Drowned World*.

References

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