

Machiavelli Writes the Future: History and Progress in Richard Jefferies's *After London*

Caroline Sumpter

School of English, Queens University, Belfast

Writing in *Scrutiny* in 1938, Q. D. Leavis suggested that Richard Jefferies “was one of those comprehensive geniuses from whose work you can take whatever you are inclined to find” (203).¹ One early reader who was certainly inclined to see his own political hopes in Jefferies’s writing was William Morris. En route to an 1885 meeting with Yorkshire socialists, Morris famously became engrossed in one of Jefferies’s novels. In his autobiography, Edward Carpenter recalled:

I remember [Morris] arriving from the train with Jefferies’s book *After London* in his hands - which had just come out. The book delighted him with its prophecy of an utterly ruined and deserted London, gone down in swamps and malaria, with brambles and weeds spreading through slum streets and fashionable squares, and pet dogs reverting to wolfish and carrion-hunting lives. And he read page after page of it to us with glee that evening as we sat round the fire. He hated modern civilisation, and London as its representative, with a fierce hatred - its shams, its hypocrisies, its stuffy indoor life, its cheapjack style, its mean and mongrel ideals; with a hatred indeed which, I cannot but think, thousands and hundreds of thousands following him will one day share. (217)²

Morris was not the only socialist reader who saw an endorsement of his own back-to-the-land sensibilities in Jefferies’s works. In an appreciative study written in 1894, Henry Salt argued that Jefferies’s mystic nature writings offered “striking points of resemblance” to those of Edward Carpenter (67), while in his study *Richard Jefferies and Civilisation* (1914) Arthur K. Thorn celebrated Jefferies as “the antithesis of civilisation”; someone who recognised that “From birth to death, men and women are floated swiftly down [its] polluted stream” (23, 25).

Yet *After London; or Wild England*, as Carpenter himself intimated, is far from a bucolic Utopia—and it is not just the pet dogs that have reverted to “wolfish and carrion-hunting” lives. Jefferies’s novel embodies a brutal vision of human and

animal struggle. The England of the future is prey to an unpredictable nature that has reclaimed the cities, but is also the product of a wolfish human nature, compelled to repeat the mistakes of the past. Here, I argue that socialist readings of Jefferies (and *After London's* well-documented influence on Morris's Utopian romance *News from Nowhere*) have tended to obscure the very different political, historical and anthropological models that shaped Jefferies's speculative vision. While the book has attracted attention from the nineteenth century onwards for its description of a destroyed, deathly and abandoned London, this is only one short episode in a much more complex narrative. Jefferies's understanding of "The Relapse into Barbarism" (the title of the first part of his futuristic romance) was, I suggest, something altogether different from Morris's dream of the end of civilization.

Tracing the forgotten but seminal influence of Machiavelli's works on *After London*, I suggest that Jefferies was amongst the late nineteenth-century writers who re-read Machiavelli's political theory in the light of contemporary colonial and evolutionary debates. While Machiavelli gave credence to fortune, the inhabitants of Jefferies's rigidly stratified future are resigned to the vicissitudes of fate: "men had or appeared to have so little control over their own lives that they might well imagine themselves overruled by destiny" (115). Edward Thomas, writing in 1908, was convinced that *After London* was "a bitter book" for Jefferies had "terribly exalted" fate "to permit so mean a world, full of corruption, slavery, suspicion, uncertainty, instead of a hearty barbarism, after the troublesome destruction of a whole civilization" (265). Yet subsequent critics have sometimes assumed that a "hearty barbarism" is central to *After London*. For Patrick Parrinder, for instance, *After London* revels "in the destruction of civilization and the opportunity it provides for a return to an idyllic, barbaric existence" (64). Although it sometimes indulges in the fantasies of the *Boy's Own* adventure, the barbaric future in *After London* is, I argue, far from idyllic. In manuscript, the 'Relapse into Barbarism' was originally titled "The Waste of Britain"—hardly suggestive of Utopian romance.³ As we shall see, Jefferies's conception of "barbarian" culture owed significant debts to the descriptions of the Germanic tribes in Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-1778), which he is known to have owned in a seven volume edition.⁴ Yet *After London* also questions the reliability of history, and the assumption that we can shape the future by learning moral lessons from the past. In this curious romance, Jefferies endorsed neither a liberal nor a Marxist vision of progress: in fact, he encouraged his readers to question whether progress was possible at all.

In "The Relapse into Barbarism" a first person narrator describes the fate of England after its depopulation, meticulously charting the gradual return of cultivated land to wilderness, and the adaptation of domesticated animals into feral breeds. Narrated by a historian from the future whose limited level of knowledge makes him resemble a chronicler from the ancient past, Thomas justly described the opening as one of Jefferies's "masterpieces in description", claiming "The calm, ironical detail with which the change is depicted has a touch of Herodotus or Oedericus Vitalis" (265). The narrator states that his chronicle "is not to be regarded as the ultimate truth"; in a future of few written documents, he is reliant on oral history ("the old men say their fathers

told them” (15, I)). The cause of the disaster has itself been lost: “the wars and hatreds which sprung up and divided people” means that when the narrator passes “from trees and animals to men [...] nothing is certain and everything is confused” (15). While the cause of the natural catastrophe can only be speculated upon, sea levels have risen, producing a huge inland lake, and the educated and wealthy have long left England. The narrator reveals that, though large cities have disappeared, most of the inhabitants of England have become slaves and retainers, classes forbidden to read and write, Jefferies’s imagined future, according to the *Pall Mall Gazette*, could be summed up as “half feudal and half colonial, with a distinct tinge of something more savage and primitive than either” (5). That colonial context is significant, for while *After London* has been classified as both time-travel and catastrophe fiction, it shares a number of closer resemblances to the satirical alternative history, futuristic variants of which had been popular since William Chesney’s *Battle of Dorking* (1871).⁵ In reflecting on Britain’s fall from Imperial splendour, Jefferies turned to a controversial theorist from the past.

Although it has been overlooked by scholars, “Machiavelli: A Study”, an article written by Jefferies written in 1877 and unpublished in his lifetime, offers illuminating insights into his inspiration for *After London*. Jefferies had referenced Machiavelli before: in his satirical pamphlet *Jack Brass*, he claimed to produce an update of *The Prince*, instructing the nineteenth century’s richest capitalist how to become Emperor of England by manipulating the press and buying up industries. His earlier novel, *World’s End* (1877), featured a businessman well-versed in Machiavelli’s doctrines (157). Jefferies’s article, however, is notable for its rehabilitation of Machiavelli, rebutting his reputation as cynical political schemer and depicting him instead as an astute chronicler of his times. In *The Prince*, Jefferies argues, “Shrewd remarks exhibiting a keen insight into human nature occur on every page. [...] He nowhere counsels evil for evil’s sake: but simply because most men are wicked, and can only be governed by making due allowance for this fact” (171). Machiavelli’s contemporaries, some of them illiterate, are depicted as “adepts in human nature”, their understanding of grasping individualism making them “deeply versed in the science of man” (“Machiavelli”, 167).

In *After London*, although the slave class cannot read, the narrator comments “they had learnt the art of reading man (the worst and lowest side of character) to such perfection that they at once detected the motive. [...] They read man, in fact, as an animal.” Although they know “every mood and vicious indication” in their masters, if any plot had been formed to overthrow the corrupt social system “those very slaves who suffered the most would have been the very men to give information, and to torture the plotters” (171). In both *After London* and in his private writings, Jefferies reveals a conception of an animalistic human nature more indebted to Hobbes and Machiavelli than to Morris or Marx. “All men are wolves - good things for all - but wolves, wolves, wolves”, Jefferies grimly lamented in an 1879 notebook (84),¹

While Norman Vance has argued that Machiavelli was “much maligned in the nineteenth century” (38), the condemnation was not universal: indeed, for a number of

high-profile late Victorian writers, his work was seen to shed light on both the possible fate of democracy at home and on international relations. In *Popular Government*, published the same year as *After London*, the father of historical jurisprudence Sir Henry Maine imagined "some modern writer, with the unflinching perspicacity of a Machiavelli" analysing the duplicitous strategies of the democratic "Party Leader": "and then, a century or two later, when Democracies were as much forgotten as the Italian Princedoms, our modern Machiavelli would perhaps be infamous and his work a proverb of immorality" (100). *The Pall Mall Gazette*, which, under the editorship of the Conservative Frederick Greenwood (1865-1880) serialised four of Jefferies's nature studies prior to their book publication, also showed a consistent interest in Machiavelli's writings. In "The Old Statecraft and the New" (1868) the paper made ironic parallels between Machiavelli's precepts and the strategies of contemporary British statesmen (10). Under the subsequent editorship of the Liberal John Morley (1880-1883) a new edition of *The Prince* (1882) was praised for bringing "many English readers to one of the most remarkable books in the history of political literature" (5). In fact, in 1884, the *Pall Mall* asserted that Machiavelli's reputation had "gone on steadily improving" for the last hundred years ("Machiavelli", 5). His reputation, it seemed, would continue to improve, for by 1897 Machiavelli was deemed a worthy subject for Morley's prestigious Romanes Lecture, which sparked a lively debate within the reviews and the newspaper press.

While Jefferies couldn't find a publisher for his own article in 1877, Machiavelli's reflections on empire were given a new topicality by these turn-of-the-century writers. Morley's address offers insights into the ways Machiavelli's writings could be read through Darwinian and Spencerian models of biological struggle, interests that are also evident in *After London*. On Machiavelli's counsel that it was sometimes necessary for a prince to use force—"the mark of the brute"—to save a State, Morley argued:

It is true to say that Machiavelli represents certain living forces in our actual world; that Science, with its survival of the fittest, unconsciously lends him illegitimate aid; that "he is not a vanishing type, but a constant and contemporary influence" (Acton). This is because energy, force, will, violence, still keep alive in the world their resistance to the control of justice and conscience, humanity and right. In so far as he represents one side in that eternal struggle, and suggests one set of considerations about it, he retains a place in the literature of modern political systems and of European morals. (49-50)

Morley's interest in "political systems and European morals" was not simply hypothetical: he served as Chief Secretary for Ireland during the Home Rule crisis of 1886, resuming his post from 1892-1896 when Gladstone was returned to power. While Morley ultimately suggested that Machiavelli had a one-sided vision of human nature, in "The Law of the Beasts", published in the *Nineteenth Century* in 1897, Jefferies's former editor Frederick Greenwood was less sure. On Machiavelli's counsel on the acceptability of resort to force, Greenwood mused "Is it teaching? Or might we not say for him as truly that it is recognition [...] that human societies are still rooted in the dispensation originated for all created things?" (536). Greenwood offered a rhetorical question:

What is the law of the beasts which Machiavelli sets behind "the laws proper to man," where, indeed, it has lurked in readiness for a call ever since the beginnings of civilisation. It is the universal law which forever destroys in order to rebuild: "the law of conflict celebrated in the description of Nature as 'red in tooth and claw'". (536)

T. H. Huxley, in his 1893 Romanes lecture "Evolution and Ethics", had argued that it was the duty of ethical man, wherever possible, to check those natural tendencies: to rise above the "promptings" of his animal heritage (51-52). Greenwood, however, offered an evolutionary narrative much closer to Spencer's understanding of a morality developing out of the laws of nature. For Greenwood, "the law of the beasts" had been eradicated from domestic affairs, but human societies had not yet reached the stage at which such laws could be transcended in foreign policy. "No State, in its relations with other States", Greenwood wrote, "is able to free itself from the domination of the primal law of Nature" (537).

This debate, although it took place after Jefferies's death, bears an interesting relationship to his own attempts to wrestle with both Machiavelli's contemporary political relevance and with the place of man within the economy of nature. Jefferies's understanding of humanity was also shaped by his concept of man as subject to an animal nature, but he did not profess a straightforwardly Darwinian understanding of evolution. Jefferies is known to have owned several books by the evolutionary anthropologist John Lubbock, but was also criticised by Lubbock for his rejection of Darwinism.⁷ Evidence for that rejection is often taken from Jefferies's autobiography, *The Story of My Heart*, in which he claimed "nothing is evolved; there is no evolution anymore than there is design in Nature" (137). These assertions, however, are counterbalanced by his acceptance of natural selection in his notebooks as a "true modifying" cause (250).⁸

In fact, it is not Darwinism, but social Darwinism—in particular, *progressive* models of social and moral evolution—that Jefferies at times appeared to attack. Jefferies's own understanding of a random nature, changing through mistakes rather than design, was clearly indebted to Darwin, and it caused some consternation amongst his socialist admirers. Salt made a pertinent point about the problems this raised for Jefferies's mysticism: "why, if Nature is wholly ultra human and indifferent, is communion with Nature so surely advocated by Jefferies as the surest training for the soul?"⁹ In offering the possibility that there was no progressive moral evolution, no growing sympathy between humans and the rest of the natural world, Salt argued that Jefferies placed himself "in direct antagonism to the general tendency in contemporary ethics" ("Richard Jefferies" 221). Writing in *Temple Bar* in 1896, however, Charles Fisher praised Jefferies's autobiography for a pathos springing from the same cause. "The *indifference of Nature* — or that aspect of her which is 'red in tooth and claw' for all human concerns could hardly be more touchingly expressed" (508). Both Jefferies's early novel *World's End* and *After London* reveal a clear understanding of the interdependence of species within a Darwinian biological system. In both, humans seem in thrall to their own animal nature as well as to an indifferent natural world. While there is no pressure from overpopulation in *After London*,

technological decline appears to have engendered a return to “the primal law of Nature”. The narrator claims “men for ever trample upon men, each pushing to the front”. Although cities have a fraction of the populations of those belonging to the nineteenth-century “ancients”, “how much greater are the bitterness and the struggle!” (26). For Jefferies, it seems, “the Law of the Beasts” was still fundamental to human survival. “If only two men [were] left in the world one would have to kill the other to save his own life”, Jefferies grimly observed in his notebooks the year before *After London* was published (165).

In an insightful account of *After London*’s influence on Morris’s romances, Roger Ebbatson suggests that, “In the romances we find both the theme of the ‘dispeopled England’ returning to a quasi-medieval social pattern, and the quest-theme whose insistent presence in the sagas can only have been reinforced by his reading of *After London*” (17). Ebbatson is certainly right to pick up on these parallels, yet critics have not always been careful to distinguish between Jefferies’s and Morris’s visions. For Raymond Williams, for instance, *After London*’s return to a “woodland feudal society” was a sign of Jefferies’s “physical hatred of the noise and rush of the city” and “the ‘rural’ equivalent of Morris’s ‘medievalism’” (196). Jefferies, however, was no back-to-the-lander who hated the metropolis. “Why pity the millions of London?”, he wrote in his 1887 notebook. “They are a great deal happier there than they could be in the fields” (282).¹⁰

If Jefferies’s future can be described as “quasi-medieval”, it is a very different medievalism to Morris’s. Jefferies certainly indicated some disturbing links between the medieval period and his own. In his notes for a possible book project to be entitled *Proletariate* [sic], he observed “The Millionaires [are] like the Feudal Lords”. He went on to state:

Anciently the poor, like Jack Cade and Jacquerie of France, rebelled against the nobles who in those days were the Capitalists and Employers of Labour. Now they rebel and burn houses of mill owner, the Capitalists representing the nobles who they say oppress them [...] so it is just the same thing over again. (*Notebooks* 40-41)

For Jefferies, however, the historical protests of the oppressed did not reveal a developing revolutionary spark—the sign of progress that they represented in Morris’s writing. Unlike Morris, Jefferies harboured no lingering nostalgia for any elements of medieval culture; nor did he celebrate the fall of Rome as ushering in a more progressive stage of social evolution in feudalism. In his notebooks he wrote:

The miserable poverty of the XIX Century. Since we cannot even sell an half acre without lawyers. The same as 4,000 years ago. Ridiculous! We have not advanced one single atom. We can do nothing for ourselves. Priests! Diplomats! The *Medievalism* of the XIX Century. *Mediaevaleissance*.
No nation now holds towards the modern world the position that Rome held towards the ancient world. (54)

In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Friedrich Engels had argued that the Germanic tribes after the fall of Rome “were able to develop and make universal the milder form of servitude they had practised in their own country [...]

which gives to the bondsmen the means of their gradual liberation as a *class* [...] a form of servitude which thus stands high above slavery” (216). It was not just Marxists, of course, who could offer a romantic celebration of the legacy of such Teutonic “barbarian” institutions: G. K. Chesterton also noted a propensity for Liberal historians such as Green to juxtapose Teutonic freedom with Roman oppression, overlooking the fact that “the Roman and the Teuton both had slaves” (33). In the medievalized future of *After London*, there is no such celebration: what is classed as a mild form of servitude by the state is a mere cover for hypocrisy, under which slavery is perpetuated. In Jefferies’s future, a class of nobles (the descendants of the better educated who remained after the great catastrophe) are dependent on euphemistically termed “servants” or “bondsmen”, who in reality are slaves who have no hope of release. Although no one is sold in the open market place, theft or any infringement of draco-nian laws means the perpetrator owes a debt to the state. Those who cannot pay are leased out to nobles who can pay the treasury the price of their labour. Thus, the narrator notes, “under the cover of highest morality, the greatest iniquity is perpetrated” (30). In Jefferies’s future, “there is hardly a town where the slaves do not outnumber the free as ten to one” (29).

It is no coincidence that, in a future in which few books have survived, Jefferies’s aristocratic protagonist Felix Aquila—who is the focus of the quest narrative which forms the second half of *After London*—jealously guards his three children’s primers from the period of the nineteenth-century ancients: one revealing the rudiments of (now lost) scientific knowledge, and two books of history, on England and on Rome. As Vance has argued, in the late nineteenth century, it is no longer Republican Rome, but Imperial Rome which seems to offer the most telling parallels with Britain, with “life at the centre and margins of empire, and the decadence associated with imperial decline” seen to preoccupy both (223). In fact, it is not just the worst traits of medieval England, but the last days of the Roman Empire and Renaissance Italy which are simultaneously evoked in *After London*. Writing on the sixteenth-century society depicted by Machiavelli in *The Prince*, Jefferies noted that the “intense political tension - a national characteristic then as now - was a legacy of the disrupted Roman empire: whose course in its glorious days Machiavelli uses as a text to teach political wisdom” (“Machiavelli” 167). In his article, Jefferies attempts to make the legacy left to sixteenth-century Italy vivid to his readers via a striking analogy:

To grasp the drift of *The Prince* that age must be re-constructed in the mind. Transfer the scent’ to England. Imagine Windsor, Reading, Bristol, Salisbury, Oxford, and almost every town of similar importance, the capitals of little separate Kingdoms; each with its own regulas, or Princelet; each with its own court, army and senate. Imagine the boundaries sharply denned, and jealously guarded. (168)

This is exactly the fate of England’s future in *After London*, in which separate states vie for prominence, and tolls are charged to restrict individual passage between kingdoms. *After London*’-“, narrator notes that “Justice is corrupt, for where there is a king or a prince it depends on the caprice of a tyrant, and where there is a republic upon the shout of the crowd” (26). In *The Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli spoke of the ultimate

tendency to corruption of any single form of government: monarchy, aristocracy or people (13—16). His analysis can be clearly seen in the corrupted and factionalised provinces, at war for territory, which mark the future England of *After London*.

Jefferies's attitude to democracy seems to have been riven with contradiction. His notebooks show that, while he thought the agricultural labourer should be given the vote, claiming "Hodge is grit stuff", he was also described as having "no shame, no self esteem, nothing - like an animal" (79). In a projected preface to a book to be entitled *Sinews: A Book of Politics*, Jefferies claimed (rather curiously, given the title) to "take no interest in politics and belong to no party or coherent body" (*Notebooks* 142). "The Working Man has lauded his virtues trumpeted but now he believes he can do no wrong, that he is the supreme judge of the Universe", he also proclaimed at another juncture (*Notebooks* 41). Noting Jefferies's tendency to defend the rights of landowners in his early writings, Salt nevertheless sought to create a progressive figure from Jefferies's mass of contradictions. "In all the immediate matters of 'practical politics' Jefferies remained a moderate, or even in some degree conservative thinker", he wrote, "while as regards his ideals of the changes impending in the future, he was heart and soul with the most advanced pioneers of social reform" ("Richard Jefferies" 219). In *After London*, however, there seems little to justify Salt's faith in Jefferies's reformist progressivism.

Jefferies's "Relapse into Barbarism" can be read on different metaphorical levels: indeed, a number of different understandings of "barbarian" traits characterise his society of the future. In *Culture and Anarchy*, when Matthew Arnold portrayed the contemporary aristocracy as "Barbarians", it was liberal individualism (not the primitive communism identified by Morris and Engels) that he saw as the defining trait of the Teutonic tribes that brought down the Roman Empire:

The Barbarians, to whom we all owe so much, and who reinvigorated and renewed our worn-out Europe, had, as is well known eminent merits; and in this country, in which we are in the most part sprung from the Barbarians, we have never had the prejudice against them which prevails among the races of Latin origin. The Barbarians brought with them that staunch individualism, as the modern phrase is, and that passion for doing as one likes, for the assertion of personal liberty, which appears to Mr Bright as the central idea of English life, and of which we have, at any rate, a very rich supply. (100)

The nineteenth-century aristocracy, Arnold argued, had inherited from their tribal ancestors a number of "barbarian" characteristics: a "passion for field-sports", "courage, a high spirit, self-confidence", and a lack of "inward virtues", typified by the absence of a strong intellectual culture (100-1). In constructing his barbarian vices and virtues, Arnold clearly drew on the descriptions of Gibbon and Tacitus. In *Decline and Fall*, Gibbon had claimed war and danger were "the only amusements adequate" to the "fierce temper" of the barbarian, "rousing him from his uncomfortable lethargy". In the dull intervals of peace, Gibbon argued, "these barbarians were immoderately addicted to deep gaming and excessive drinking; both of which [...] alike relieved them from the pain of thinking" (I.IX: 152).

In describing tribes without "cities, letters, arts, or money" (153), Gibbon also drew explicitly on Tacitus. When he typified the Germanic tribes of the first century in the

Germania (A.D. 98), Tacitus suggested that “when not engaged in warfare they spend a certain amount of time hunting, but much more in idleness, thinking of nothing else but sleeping and eating” (XV: 114). If Arnold saw the barbarians of the past in the aristocracy of the nineteenth-century present, Jefferies clearly saw them in the nobles of the future.¹¹ The narrator’s descriptions of Felix’s younger brother Oliver are typical: his “whole delight was in exercise and sport”; he has “a fiery restless spirit and defiant temper, all the utter recklessness and warrior’s instinct”; he “openly despises the studious habits and solitary life of the elder” (37-38). Felix, with an interest in the manuscripts of the ancients ignored by his class, becomes a figure who conquers through both intellectual reflection and physical bravery, uniting the warrior’s barbarian sensibility with an unusual measure of Arnoldian “inward virtues”.

Yet anthropological as well as historiographical understandings of barbarism shape *After London*, and here Jefferies found it difficult to imagine a world outside its linear framework. Using universalised indicators of technological and cultural progress, anthropologists influenced by E. B. Tylor sought to place different contemporary races at different developmental points along the same evolutionary timeline.¹² Even within supposedly civilized races, however, development was not necessarily assumed to be even: indeed, Tylor made much of the notion of savage “survivals”.¹³ Peasant customs were deemed to be just such “survivals”: evidence of groups whose journey up the ladder of progress was slower than that of the surrounding population. In *Custom and Myth* (1885), Andrew Lang, a Tylorian disciple, spoke of the survival of folkloric custom, “immaterial relics of old races [...] and of ‘the classes which have shared least in progress’” as comparable to the study of stone axes and early pottery: “the student of folklore soon finds that these unprogressive classes retain many of the beliefs of savages, just as the Hebridean people [...] bake clay pots without the aid of the wheel, like modern South Sea islanders, or like their own prehistoric ancestors” (11).

In Jefferies’s future, the scattered population of England co-exist at different developmental stages, some in savagery (the bushmen and gypsies), some in barbarism (the shepherds) and some (the nobles) at the level of early city civilization. Jefferies imaginatively used the comparative method in *After London* to construct two kinds of savage survival: “relics of old races”, whose progress appears to have slowed to the point of stasis, and “unprogressive classes” who have gradually developed “savage” racial traits by rejecting civilized culture. Drawing on a confused Lamarckian notion of “use inheritance”, custom and culture are assumed over generations to become distinct inherited racial traits. The narrator notes that, after the “great change”, when depopulation led to a breakdown of technology and communication, localities were “separated and divided, [and] there came also to be many races where in the first place was one people” (19). Jefferies’s gypsies are constructed as a racially pure group unchanged for centuries, untouched by the rise and fall of civilizations:

Under the name of gypsies, those who are now often called Romany and Zingari were well known to the ancients. Indeed, they boast that their ancestry goes back so much farther than the oldest we can claim, that the ancients themselves were but modern to them. Even in that age of high civilization, which immediately preceded the present

[...] they remained apart, and still continue after civilisation has disappeared, exactly the same as they were before it commenced. (22)

In his non-fictional *Chambers' Journal* article "Iust Before Winter" published a year later, gypsies were described as "human parasites", "primeval man with primeval nature". In a disturbing eugenic argument, they were viewed as promoting a damaging racial miscegenation: to have "saturated the English folk" and "stained the native blood" (803). In this article, Jefferies suggested Hint the gypsy race was "so old they went through civilisation ten thousand years since; they have worn it all out, even hope in the future; they merely live acquiescent to fate, like the red deer" (802). The gypsies are depicted as both outside and beyond civilization; an animalistic and "primeval" precursor and successor, who have survived numerous cycles of decline and fall.

In *After London*, while the gypsies are depicted as culturally static, they are still perceived to be more advanced than the murderous bushmen, the "human vermin of the woods" who are "everywhere considered lowest" (19). The bushmen are the descendants, not of "old races", but of Lang's "unprogressive classes" within civilization: descendants of the "degraded class" of ancients who, even when all were given the opportunity to be literate, begged in the highways and "refused to avail themselves of the benefits of civilization" (20). Such racialization of class was far from unusual, of course: in "The Early History of Man" (1869), the anthropologist John McLennan identified "predatory bands" of contemporary Londoners "leading the life of the lowest nomads" (286), while in 1889 Charles Booth used the term "barbarian" in the first volume of *Life and Labour of the People in London* to describe "class A": the unregenerate London poor whose numbers were low but whose vicious habits were perceived (like those of Jefferies's bushmen) to be hereditary.¹⁴ Jefferies's reliance on the comparative method and on the concept of "savage survivals" was clear in his unpublished "Essay on Instinct", which he was working on in the late 1860s.¹⁵ Here, he claimed:

It is not to be supposed because stone axes and arrowheads are found buried in positions where they must have lain several thousand years that at the time of their deposit the whole world was in an infancy of barbarism. At the present day, in the nineteenth century famous for steam engines and the march of intellect, one only has to go to [...] the Pacific Ocean to find stone axes still in use. (Add MSS 58813, 32)

After London offers its own careful descriptions of technological development (the bushmen use iron axes or spuds, and have not developed the arts of smelting steel). It was not just the "residuum" of urban dwellers who were perceived by Jefferies as capable of reverting to an earlier stage of development, given the right environment and circumstances. In his notebooks, he speculated on the speed at which the rural peasantry might return to such a pre-civilized state. "Wayside Inn. 2 men etc to one woman. See how easily and rapidly men would revert to the conditions of savage life. Give these a knob-kerrie and assegai or bow and they are the same" (35).

The comparative method did its own work in bolstering narratives of Imperial expansion, as Jefferies's article "The Queen's New Subjects", published in *Cassell's*

Family Magazine in 1877 makes clear.¹⁶ Here, Jefferies offered a patriotic account of British expansion into the Transvaal: “probably the native rates will rejoice at the sight of an English flag” (524). The careful delineation of ritual hierarchies makes interesting comparison to *After London*: the Boers “might almost lie called white stationary gypsies” (522), yet their leader Pretorius is also given barbarian traits that echo the martial valour of the Germanic tribes at the (all of Koine; depicted as a “rude hero”, he is “such a man as in olden times would have been a king”. The brutal treatment of native tribes (Bushmen, Bechuanas and Xhosa) under the Boers is ultimately seen to justify British rule. The England of *After London* becomes a microcosm of these Imperial struggles. Jefferies relies on a model that both racializes cultural traits, and then assumes differential advancement **according** to racial development.¹⁷

In *After London*, it is not just Jefferies’s nobles, but another group whose “rude” heroic traits echo those of Pretorius. At the end of the romance, Felix becomes the leader of a number of tribes of illiterate shepherds, who he wins over with his valour in killing an attacking band of gypsies. In refusing the title of “King”, in peace time, and instead choosing simply to be called the “Leader of the War” during battle, Felix puts in place an authority structure familiar from Gibbon’s description of the Germanic tribes, which in peace “acknowledged not any supreme chief” (1.9: 154). May Morris claimed that William Morris read Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* “more than once during different bouts of illness” and suggested that it was “taken up constantly in the last years of life” (Boos 324). The tribal shepherds united by Felix (who, in their hospitality and valour, are perhaps the only group accorded a hint of noble primitivism) are violent but faithful, and are also untouched by property and the corrupting influence of the city. It is here, perhaps, that it is possible to see how *After London* may have chimed with Morris’s own reading of Gibbon, and exerted an imaginative influence on his vision of a new barbarism (Morris, *Letters* II: 436).

Yet for Jefferies, history in general—and Gibbon in particular—offered neither romantic barbarians nor consoling visions of progress. In an entry in his notebook for 1887, he stated: Prayer. Nine sacks of the right ears. Mogul. “Why was I made of these?” why not one of those built into the living tower? Why not one of those impaled? How could you expect si prayer to be selected out from the million millions? Intense self-vanity. Nine sacks of curs - Human Life not the slightest consequence. Gibbon, sacks. (234).

Decline and Fall, of course, is a document of barbarism as well as of civilization in more ways than one. In a footnote, Gibbon wrote that “The people of Ispahan supplied 70,000 human skulls for the structure of several lofty towers” built by Tamerlane (III.34: 915), while he subsequently discussed the Tartars’ victory at the battle of Ligny, in which they “defeated the dukes of Silesia, the Polish palatines, and the great master of the Teutonic order, and filled nine sacks with the right ears of the slain” (VI.64: 1141). For Jefferies, it was not the contrast between barbarism and civilization, but the evidence of a long history of human cruelty—revealing faith in a

benevolent God as a delusion—that appeared to be the bleak lesson of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall*.¹⁸

The vexed question of the relationship between Empire and progress, a fascination for both Machiavelli and Gibbon, was a source of renewed concern as the British Empire expanded. Progress was ultimately endorsed by Gibbon in *Decline and Fall*. In the conclusion to volume IV, he assumed that “no people, unless the face of nature is changed, will relapse into their original barbarism” (1055), reaching “the pleasing conclusion that every age of the world has increased, and still increases, the real wealth, the happiness, the knowledge) and perhaps the virtue, of the human race” (1055-56). Yet Burrow is certainly right to hear “echoes or even endorsements of the Machiavellian diagnosis of the nemesis of conquest” in the cherished Gibbon (*History* 356). Both writers had pointed to a weakening of the Roman Empire as it expanded due to a reliance on mercenary soldiery, whose military training enabled them to take arms against the Empire they were employed to serve (Machiavelli, *Prince* 43-44).

Jefferies referred to Machiavelli’s attempt to leach this lesson in his own time: his “most earnest effort during his grasp of power was the substitution of a militia raised at home in the place of the treacherous mercenaries Florence usually employed” (“Machiavelli” 171). Morley, too, noted that Machiavelli’s *Art of War* was written to “induce his countrymen to substitute for mercenary armies a national militia -to-day one of the organic ideas of the European system” (15). The reliance on mercenary armies clearly threatens English integrity in *After London*, but they come from within a United Kingdom that is far from United. The English narrator notes that order in principedoms and republics is “kept by Irish, Scottish and Welsh mercenary soldiers”, in “the face of the notorious fact that these nations have sworn to be avenged on us [...] and that twice already vast armies have swept along threatening to entirely overwhelm the whole commonwealth” (26-27). While he does not blame these nations for such attempts to seize English territory (“for, as they point out, the ancients from whom we are descended held them in subjection many hundred years” (7)), the Irish, Scottish and Welsh have become new barbarian armies at the gates. The Irish have already taken Chester, and for the narrator, “these nations are always on the verge and margin of our world, and wait but an opportunity to rush in upon it” (29). Written when the Home Rule crisis was escalating, Machiavelli’s image of a fallen Rome clearly shapes the vision of British disintegration in *After London*.

While he strongly contested Frederick Greenwood’s claim that the “Law of the Beasts” was justified in foreign affairs, the positivist Frederic Harrison acknowledged that, as the Empire expanded, the threats to its integrity were real:

Many sensible and patriotic men agree with Mr Greenwood. As a “Little Englander” said, if we are to go on at this rate adding to our Empire and increasing our pretensions, we shall have to double our navy and treble our army [...] the vast coalition against this truly abnormal Empire - an Empire utterly beyond the record of history, and beyond the dreams of conquering kings - already exists in a dormant, potential, subjective state. (469)

Both Machiavelli and Gibbon, of course, offered suggestive insights into the consequences of over-expansion for Imperial Rome. In *Discourses on Livy*, Machiavelli noted the dangers of expansion to the internal security of a republic, but also noted the dangers of stasis; for “even if Heaven should be so kind that she would never have to wage war, it might happen that idleness would make it either weak or divided: and these two things together, or each one in itself, would be cause of its ruin” (1.6: 37). Those who saw parallels between the acquisitive drive of Rome and nineteenth-century capitalism could also wonder if this energising force would inevitably be followed by complacency and corruption. In Gibbon’s descriptions of the Germanic tribes unacquainted with money it is possible to see that paradox. “Money”, he claimed, “in a word, is the most universal incitement [...] of human industry”; he found it hard to see how a people not motivated by it “could emerge from the grossest barbarism” (I.IX: 151). Yet the barbarian tribes, though war-like and “savage”, also found “their poverty secured their freedom, since our desires and our possessions are the strongest fetters of despotism” (I.IX: 153). As Burrow has argued,

The fatal sequence of virtue, conquest, luxury, corruption, loss of freedom, and ultimate surrender to hardy barbarian conquerors is taken by Gibbon as something like *a* universal law, for the barbarian conquerors themselves are, inevitably, launched into the same sequence. [...] Power and even civilization itself seem to be locked into a self-defeating cycle. (358)

In a curious early novel by Jefferies, *The Rise of Maximin: Emperor of the Occident*, some of those processes appear to be played out. Set in an alternative timeframe, the novel focuses on the military exploits of Maximin and a small band of followers, and his final triumph over numerous local rulers to become Emperor. Maximin and his troops appear before their enemies in the guise of a barbarian army. After his immense military successes, Maximin is prey to indolence and inactivity; the novel ends when he triumphantly arrives back in “Sandover”, from where he set out. This dnular narrative, which nevertheless represents immense individual achievement, is also explored in the second part of *After London*. Machiavelli seems to have been central to Jefferies’s fascination with cyclical histories. ()D Machiavelli’s understanding of a treacherous human nature, Jefferies wrote:

The contrast is startling when these maxims and instructions are compared with the popular theories of the nineteenth century which are so entirely optimist [...] Moral, social and political progress is believed to be the normal state of nations: only accident of circumstances has ever retarded it. (171)

Morley, too, was conscious of Machiavelli’s challenge to nineteenth-century liberal histories: “To the question whether the world grows better or worse, Machiavelli gave an answer that startles an age like ours, that lives on its faith in progress. The world neither grows belter nor worse; in fact it is always the same” (23). For Jefferies, human nature was also always the same. “Man - ferocity is disguised by civilisation. [...] Individualism - not evil - but nature”, he wrote in an 1887 notebook (256). This world view could not be more different to Morris’s, with his belief in a historically variable human nature, and a proletariat metaphorically conceived as new “barbarians”,

destined to overthrow capitalism (Morris, “Art and Socialism” 636).¹⁹ *After London*’s conclusion—in which Felix unites the disparate tribes of shepherds—understandably appealed to Morris: a seeming return to the rude virtues of barbarian tribal society after the corruption of the city state. It is possible to see why “absurd hopes” curled round his heart as he read it, and why he wished to be thirty years younger to “see the game played out” (Morris, *Letters* II: 426). Yet Morris overlooked the more troubling interpretation of *After London*’s ending. When Felix instructs the shepherds to build a fortified tower, the rise of the city state and cycle of acquisition looks set to begin again.

Contemporary critics were generally confused and disappointed by the book’s conclusion. “It may be that Mr Jefferies has aimed at some kind of allegory. If so, we fail to take his meaning”, the *Graphic* lamented in 1885 (“The Reader” 499), while the *Standard* criticised the novel’s “abrupt and disappointing conclusion” (“New Books” 2). Walter Besant laconically noted “had it been more of a novel, with an end as well as a beginning, it would have proved more successful” (211). Yet Jefferies was adamant that *After London* was in “no sense a novel”: and the allegory is perhaps to be found in history’s lack of endings.²⁰ Morris chose to find a progressive history, which validated his own revolutionary optimism, in the conclusion of Jefferies’s romance.²¹ Yet the Machiavellian reading of *After London*—in which the future of humanity is destined to be “just the same”—is just as grimly compelling.

Notes

[1] Raymond Williams also argued for Jefferies’s “genius” (194), but *After London* enjoyed mixed critical fortunes in the twentieth century. In the 1960s, W. J. Keith deemed it “not one of [Jefferies’s] best books” (*Richard Jefferies* 115), while Jerome Buckley viewed it as a “deservedly forgotten” novel (73). John Fowles’s important scholarly edition (1980) is now out of print, but a new edition from Broadview, edited by Heidi Scott, is forthcoming.

[2] See also Morris, *Letters* II: 426.

[3] “After London”, BL Richard Jefferies Collection, Add MSS 58805A.

[4] See Keith, “Reading” 19.

[5] Pamboukian perplexingly places *After London* in the time-travel tradition, despite the fact that there is no time-travelling narrator or character (12–14). Giblett classes *After London* as a “post-apocalyptic dystopian novel”, but his psychoanalytic reading is dehistoricised and rather unconvincing (80–83). On *After London* as catastrophic fiction, see Parrinder; on the significance of the *Battle of Dorking* to the alternative history of the future, see Nellist 119–22.

[6] Looker attributes this quote to Rousseau (*Notebooks* 84) but this seems unlikely: *Homo Homini Lupus* was a Latin proverb, most famously appropriated by Hobbes in the dedication to *De Give* (1651)—“Man to Man is an arrant Wolfe” (2).

[7] Jefferies owned *Ants, Bees and Wasps* (1884) amongst other works by Lubbock; see Keith, “Reading” 19. On Lubbock’s criticism, see Brian Morris 384–5.

[8] See also “Nature and Eternity” 47, which suggests a clear debt to evolutionary understandings of biological change. The possibility of progressive evolution is also expressed here, however, contradicting claims in some of Jefferies’s other writings.

[9] Ebbatson has discussed Jefferies’s mysticism in *The Story of my Heart* in the context of theorizations of modernity: see *Prophetic Landscapes* 114–34.

[10] Jefferies sometimes found exhilaration in the London crowds: see Skilton.

[11] Jefferies and Arnold were acquainted: Thomas Hardy noted that he met them both, in the company of Henry James, at a dinner given by the publisher G. Murray Smith in 1880; see *Life* 136.

[12] On the comparative method, see Tylor; Kuper 78–82; and Stocking 169–79. [13] On this concept, see Tylor 15.

[14] On McLennan see also Stocking 219; on Booth see Wiener 231.

[15] This date of composition is noted in Besant 71.

[16] On the attribution of this article see Pearson.

[17] Hooker has also suggested that the book is “imbued with the spirit of imperialism” (51), but makes no reference to this article, or to Jefferies’s debts to Machiavelli and Gibbon. [18] See also *Notebooks* 222, 235.

- [19] On Morris's complex relationship with barbarism, see Sumpter.
 [20] Cited in Besant 210.
 [21] For more recent optimistic readings of Jefferies's ending, see Keith, *Richard Jefferies* 121 and Nellist 129.

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