

'The Other Side': Visions of America

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For someone who had never been to America, Richard Jefferies mentions the country and the people quite frequently. So from what he wrote, it is possible to discover what he felt about the United States, how close he came, twice, to going there himself and since he did not go, how important the ideal image of it was to him.

In 1864 as is well known, Jefferies and his cousin James Cox, after a failed attempt to walk to Moscow, bought cheap passages to New York. At Liverpool they found, having spent all their money, that their tickets did not cover their food on ship and returned to Swindon in disgrace. Presumably Jefferies' father could not be too severe; he himself had spent two years in New York State as a young man, and from numerous asides in *Bevis*, *The Amateur Poacher*, and other works it is clear that his exploits were well known to his family and regarded with some pride.

Soon after this episode in Jefferies' life he began work on the *North Wilts Herald*, and one of his first published works was a serialised story 'Who Will Win? or American Adventure'.¹ It is the highly improbable story of a young Englishman who sails to what sounds like Savannah, Georgia, and joins up with the army of the South. The actual scrapes which this young man gets into must have come straight out of Jefferies' head, including what may be the most incredible cliff-hanger episode ever to be foisted on a reader. The broad details of the parts dealing with campaigning could have been learned from newspapers, but the dialogue has quite a genuine ring to it and this was probably derived from his father, James Luckett Jefferies. The strongest hint of parental inspiration occurs near the beginning, however, where we read that: 'his [that is the hero's] uncle had been a fine specimen of the rover in his youth; had traversed the American continent, rifle in hand, and yet retained enough of the vital heat to return home and live to the ripe age of 83 - long enough with his tales of daring to implant a wild wish to visit the new world in his nephew's breast.'² Another work probably written at about this time but never published is 'Ben Tubbs Adventures'.³ Ben too is carried off to the United States and undergoes a series of vicissitudes before he is rescued and restored to his family. If we are to judge by these two tales, Jefferies regarded the USA as a land of adventure and romance.

For those wishing, or needing, to emigrate it was, of course, another thing. Jefferies knew this very well, as he shows in several essays, such as chapter XVIII of *Hodge and His Masters*, for example, or 'Field Words and Ways' and 'Just Before Winter' in *Field and Hedgerow*. America was a place where poor people with skills could afford to go, were free to enter, and could expect to prosper. Even Martial Barnard in *The Dewy Morn* toys with the idea of going: 'I think I shall get out of it. I am very much inclined to sell off and go to the Jefferies saw America as a place for emigration but distinct from, say, Australia in its attitude to change and progress - an attitude which he clearly admired. In *Hodge*, he contrasted that attitude with the efforts of the local men: The most striking characteristic of their tutor [Mr X the gambler] is his Yankee-like fertility of resource and bold innovations - the very antipodes of the old-style of "clod-compeller".⁵ Into the mouth of Thardover in 'King of Acres' he put the words 'Wonder if a gang of American labourers could make anything out of our farms? There they work from sunrise to sunset. Suppose import a gang and try. Did anyone ever see such a helpless set as that yonder?'⁶

Chief of all emigrants for Jefferies must have been his own brother Henry who had stayed on at Coate until the farm was sold and then left for Texas, probably in late 1878 since the Texas census for 1900 shows that Harry Jeffries [sic] arrived in 1879. Jefferies' own notebook for 1880, number IX, now in the British Library, has an entry opposite folio 18 which reads: 'Cameron, Tex. 13 Bathwick St.' and a later one referring to Brenham, Washington County. These two towns are in Texas, not far from each other and not all that far from Richmond, where Harry Jefferies married in 1884. Most readers of Jefferies' books think that 'Orion' in *The Amateur Poacher* was modelled on Harry. If we assume that Harry Jefferies was already in Texas in 1879, then the reference to 'Orion' in the first chapter of *The Amateur*

Poacher, printed first in the *Pall Mall Gazette* for 1 March 1879 is significant: The last I heard of him he had just ridden through a prairie fire and says the people out there think nothing of it'. More significant still are the words that follow, words omitted from the book version, namely: 'which I must go and see for myself as soon as these confessions are finished.' They finished, as far as the *Pall Mall* was concerned, in July 1879.

Did he really mean to go? There is some support for the idea. James Luckett Jefferies, widowed and in retirement in Bath, received letters in 1896 from Dr Theodore Rake. James Luckett replied, and in his letter of 21 November wrote: 'I had been in America - New York State on the Hudson for near two years when I was about sixteen ...'⁷ In July 1879 James Luckett had paid a visit to Richard and Jessie at their home in Surbiton. Referring to this visit, and to his own visit to the United States he went on: '... and as he [Richard] intended making tour there then he took down all I could tell him and I very soon after had a letter from him and a Book of Walt Whitman's and the pages marked where I had described I have that letter and book still and the last he wrote me a very short time before he was gone.' From this it looks as though Harry had gone to Texas and written home enthusiastically to his family; the fever had infected Richard and for a while he seriously considered going out there, getting as much information as he could from his father.

As we know, he did not go, but it is of some importance that, at the age of 30, he still wanted to go to America and equally of importance that he decided not to go. If we look at the two statements: 'I must go and see for myself and 'he intended making tour there' we are forced to think that emigration was not under consideration, rather a visit of two or three months, perhaps a working visit, leading to material for articles. Why did he not go? There could have been many reasons, but he would have had to leave behind a wife and four-year-old son; he was doing well; and with *Greene Ferne Farm*, *Hodge*, and *Round About a Great Estate* all being worked on at the time when he might have gone, he had all the work he could handle. By the time he wrote chapter I of *Round About a Great Estate*, the decision not to go must have been made, for he says: 'I sometimes seem to hear the sounds of axes that have been ringing in the forests of America for a hundred years and envy the joy of the lumbermen as the tall pines topple to the fall...' America has now become a permanent part of his imagined world.

In an early essay, 'Marlborough Forest', Jefferies wrote: 'The heart has a yearning for the unknown'.⁸ For some reason he never looked to Europe, or Siberia, to satisfy his yearning though he might well have, since there were forests without end, and his trip at the age of 16 had certainly not been frustrated by want of territory. Europe may have failed to qualify, having been walked over by so many others, in other words being too much 'known'. Or Jefferies may have shared the feelings of the folk he describes in 'Country Literature': 'The Continent does not exist to them; but the United States is a sort of second home ...'⁹ In addition to this, the vast, open, quiet, innocent spaces of America had a fundamental attraction for him to which he refers again and again, as in 'Downs' (*The Open Air*) where he declares 'A yard or two outside the railway in America the primeval forest or prairie often remains untouched' or in 'The Backwoods of London' where, in order to convey the sense of quiet in the place he is describing he says: 'it is still, as in the vast backwoods of the Far West.'¹⁰ Geographically accurate or not, it is his mental picture that is important because it was an image that attracted and delighted him, both the sight and the sound.

From here it is a short step to the land of illusion, 'the beyond', the portrayal of which he was afraid would finally elude him. Long after the possibility of going there had vanished for ever, America remained for Jefferies an important concept, an Eden of boundless extent and permanent virtue, because he never had to face its drawbacks. Much of Jefferies' writing dealt with reality, but he was also a part-time Utopian, and in his fiction he could make experiments on paper, avoiding what was painful, simplifying the scene by clearing away restrictions and obstacles. Robert Louis Stevenson, his contemporary, but a more open man, expressed the same idea in 1884: '... the artist writes with more gusto and effect of those things which he has only wished to do, than of those which he has done. Desire is a wonderful telescope, and Pisgah the best observatory.'¹¹ For Jefferies there were several attempts to portray this lost domain' or land of longing.

In one of his last essays, the matchless 'My Old Village', he departs in one place from what is, superficially, a factual account and relates the story of the lost oasis. It is the story of men who stray into an oasis and enjoy happy times there, leaving loaded with treasure. In old age they try to return and are frustrated. Jefferies, in the essay, has been describing the joys and sorrows of his youth, and the futility of trying to recapture it; the fable illustrates his position. One's youth is inaccessible temporally, America is inaccessible spatially. One may look; one may not try to go, for to go will bring disappointment. A similar fable is recounted in *Bevis*, the story of the traveller to Tibet, who is shown

the bronze door and allowed to glimpse the wonders beyond; 'his mind and soul had gone through' but the bronze door shuts and he cannot get through.¹² These are brief attempts by Jefferies to portray his idealised land.

A longer passage, and one which seems to parallel most closely Jefferies' vision of what America must be like is the episode with the shepherds in *After London*. The combination of cliffs, shore, open pasture, lake, and forest in chapter XXV, while supposedly like the geography of Coate Water, is also very like the terrain of the latter part of the story 'Who Will Win?' of 1866. It is an unlikely combination of physical features. It is unlikely in other ways: the simple, generous, pastoral people are hard to believe in. The gypsies who make raids remind us of American Indians, but it is not clear what they really want. Felix, the hero, commends himself to the shepherds by being polite to their women and by possessing skills which the men admire. Yet we find it hard to believe that they would want to make an unknown man their leader; we also find it hard to believe that Felix would be happy there. Jefferies himself, who refused to give up feather beds and white bread,¹³ would have scorned such a life. Yet here is an ideal society to which he is clearly attached; it is not one he would have wished to live in.

The traveller in *Bevis*, we are told, 'got tired of it always coming to the other side. He did so hate the other side, and he used to dawdle through the forests and lose his way ... this was such a little world he hated it...' And this fabled land, this place with no other side, was troubling Jefferies long before he wrote *Bevis*, or *After London*, and once again it appears in a work of fiction. In *Restless Human Hearts*, a book he wrote shortly after his marriage, he said:

the very best thing for us all would be the discovery of a new continent; not one like America, where one can get across it and find the sea the other side, but an illimitable continent - a forest, a plain, mountains, rivers, lakes without end - stretching away for ever; a continent into which men might wander day by day, for ever and for ever, beginning in youth and going on till death came, straight away as the crow flies, and never reach the other side; a continent which hundreds of generations of men might take up each other's tracks - as the one dropped the other taking up the journey - and never arrive, but always be travelling onwards, onwards, onwards. Then we should have a resource - somewhere to hide ourselves; now the world is so small.¹⁴

These words strike the same chord as that heard in John Steinbeck's story *The Red Pony*, where the leader of the people who have westered as far as the Pacific tells of 'a line of old men along the shore hating the ocean because it stopped them.' Their ability to realize paradise proves unequal to their dream of attaining it.

Jefferies' traveller did not go through the bronze door; the men who lost their oasis never found it again. Jefferies continued to dream of an endless land with no settling of accounts; his mind and his soul went through but he himself never went there. America came nearest to being Jefferies' ideal land; it remained ideal so long as he did not go.

NOTES

- 1 Reprinted in *The Early Fiction of Richard Jefferies* (Arthur Young, 1896) edited by Grace Toplis.
- 2 *ibid.*, p. 93.
- 3 BL Add Mss 58826.
- 4 *The Dewy Morn*, chap. XXXVIII.
- 5 *Hodge and His Masters*, chap. V.
- 6 *The Hills and the Vale* (Duckworth, 1909) p. 81.
- 7 BL Add Mss 58822.
- 8 *The Hills and the Vale*, p. 12.
- 9 *The Life of the Fields*.
- 10 *Chronicles of the Hedges* (Phoenix House, 1948) p. 113.
- 11 'A Humble Remonstrance' in *Memories and Portraits* (Chatto and Windus, 1887).
- 12 *Bevis*, chap. XXXIX.
- 13 'Village Miners', *The Life of the Fields*.
- 14 *Restless Human Hearts* (Tinsley Bros, 1875) II, p. 293-4.