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# Richard Jefferies: *Nature Near London*

Naomi Racz

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Although *Nature Near London* is maybe more accurately classified as suburban nature writing, the 'near' in the title giving it away, it would feel remiss to begin this series with any other book. After all, a genre doesn't spring up fully formed over night and part of the aim of this series is to explore the evolution of urban nature writing as a sub-species distinct from nature writing (and if, indeed, it is possible to define the genre at all). With *Nature Near London* the seed of an idea was being sown – the idea that it is not necessary to turn one's back on the city to find nature. I also include Jefferies' book because the city, London, looms large; it is a presence that forms a counter-point to the places Jefferies explores. It also looms large in Jefferies' own mind, and magnetised him even as he seeks to escape it.

Jefferies was born in 1848 at Coate Farm, in Wiltshire. By his own accounts, Jefferies was not a popular child and he preferred the company of books and nature to people. In his nostalgic essay 'My Old Village' Jefferies writes of how the people in his childhood village were not particularly friendly to him: 'Nothing to do with them at all; it was me. I planted myself every where – in all the fields and under all the trees.' The landscape in which the young Jefferies planted himself was dominated by the Downs and the dramatic vistas they offered. In his autobiography, *The Story of My Heart*, Jefferies writes about walking up Liddington Hill: 'There the view was over a broad plain, beautiful with wheat, and inclosed [sic] by a perfect amphitheatre of green hills'. That word 'amphitheatre' suggests a grandeur of scale. It was also on these hills that Jefferies experienced a sense of spiritual oneness with nature and the wider universe:

Sometimes on lying down on the sward I first looked up at the sky, gazing for a long time till I could see deep into the azure and my eyes were full of the colour; then I turned my face to the grass and thyme... Having drunk deeply of the heaven above and felt the most glorious beauty of the day... I now became lost, and absorbed into the being or existence of the universe. I felt down deep into the earth under, and high above into the sky, and farther still to the sun and the stars. Still further beyond the stars into the hollow of space, and losing thus my separateness of being came to seem like a part of the whole.

Jefferies seems to have spent much of his childhood and early adulthood lost

in his own thoughts, wandering the countryside, reading, thinking and shooting. Coate Farm was not a successful farm and Jefferies did not take to farming. Finally, after years of what seems to everyone else to be idleness, in 1866 Jefferies began to shape a career for himself with a position on the *North Wilts Herald*. Over the next eight years he made many attempts to get his work, and fiction in particular published. After some initial success with letters and articles about rural life published in newspapers and magazines, his first book, a novel called *The Scarlet Shawl*, was published in 1874.

In the same year Jefferies married Jessie Baden and the following year they had a son. The demands of supporting his family through his writing led Jefferies to want to be nearer to London and in 1877 they moved to the London suburb of Surbiton. It was in Surbiton that Jefferies gathered the observations that would become *Nature Near London*.

Near the beginning of *Nature Near London* Jefferies induces his readers to: 'Always go over a stile...' that is to say, never omit to explore a footpath. He refers to it as 'the one rule that should ever be borne in mind by those who wish to see the land as it really is.' It is a rule that Jefferies himself follows religiously. Not only does he seem to go over every stile, but he also combs every inch of his surroundings with great patience and attention. Nothing is beyond Jefferies, everything is worthy of his time. Perhaps nothing exemplifies this more than the passages on grass.

Grass is stuck somewhere between the human and the natural. For some it is the antithesis of natural, the domain of perfectly manicured lawns and the herbicides used to keep them that way. However, writers such as Tim Dee, with his book *Four Fields*, have gone some way to rehabilitate grass and perhaps he owes some homage to Jefferies. Describing the many shades of colour found in meadow grass, Jefferies writes:

Of the million blades of grass no two are of the same shade. Pluck a handful and spread them out side by side and this is at once evident. Nor is any single blade the same shade all the way up. There may be a faint yellow towards the root, a full green about the middle, at the tip perhaps the hot sun has scorched it, and there is a trace of brown.

I think any writer who can inspire a reader to take a closer look at their lawn is worthy of admiration.

Jefferies is surprised by the abundance of nature he encounters in Surbiton. Indeed, he seems to think that nature is more abundant near London than it is in the deepest countryside. At one point he writes about the wood-pigeons he encounters in a copse: 'though so associated with the deepest and most lonely woods, here they were close to the house and garden, constantly heard, and almost always visible; and London, too, so near.' That refrain, 'and London, too, so near,' echoes throughout the book.

Jefferies also writes beautifully about the things that he discovers on his walks around Surbiton, and displays a deep affinity for nature and birds in particular:

The blackbird's whistle is very human, like some one playing the flute; an uncertain player now drawing forth a bar of a beautiful melody and then losing it again. He does not know what quiver or what turn his note will take before it ends; the note leads him and completes itself. His music strives to express his keen appreciation of the loveliness of the days, the golden glory of the meadow, the light, and the luxurious shadows.

The striking difference between Jefferies writing about the Downs and his writing in *Nature Near London* is the difference in perspective. Jefferies' perspective has zoomed in. From taking in the sweeping vistas of the Downs and the entire universe, he has focused his attention on the small details of suburban nature – the wild flowers growing on the train embankments, a single trout in a brook, a patch of edgeland orchard, right down to small creatures such as ants. To quote myself<sup>1</sup>: 'Despite the terms used to describe cities – sprawl comes to mind – they often draw us in on a much smaller scale.' Jefferies seems to have felt this effect in Surbiton.

But it is not just Surbiton that draws Jefferies in; London is a constant presence in *Nature Near London* and indeed seems to have captured his imagination throughout his life, since he was a small boy visiting his aunt and uncle there. It is a city that at turns delights and repels him. In a short essay in his posthumously published collection *The Toilers of the Fields*, called 'The Lions in Trafalgar Square', Jefferies writes about the lions of the essay's title and also about the experience of standing next to the lions and watching the life of the city go by:

London is the only real place in the world. The cities turn towards London as young partridges run to their mother. The cities know that they are not real. They are only houses and wharves, and bricks and stucco; only outside. The minds of all men in them, merchants, artists, thinkers, are bent on London... A house is not a dwelling if a man's heart be elsewhere. Now, the heart of the world is in London, and the cities with the simulacrum of man in them are empty. They are moving images only; stand here and you are real.

However, in *Nature Near London* Jefferies also recognises the way in which the city makes it easier for people to disconnect from nature and from the seasons:

[A]lthough the cornfields and the meadows come so closely up to the offices and warehouses of mighty London, there is a line and mark in the minds of men

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<sup>1</sup> Naomi Racz, 'On the Benefits of Urban Monomania', 13 Jan 2014.  
<http://www.humansandnature.org/benefits-urban-monomania>.

between them.

Ultimately, however, Jefferies is able to see past this divide and to view the city and the country, not as separate entities but as equal parts of a whole. It is this that is perhaps one of his most important ideas in relation to urban nature and Edward Thomas expresses it beautifully in his biography of Jefferies:

He [Jefferies] could not love the suburb gardens ... But with London itself it was different. London is one of the immense things of the world, like the Alps, the Sahara, the Western Sea; and it has a complexity, a wavering changefulness along with its mere size... Huge, labyrinthine, dense, yet airy and plastic to the roving spirits, it troubles the midnight stars, and conspires with the winds and the setting sun to colour and mould the clouds ... The spirits of grass and tree and pool have been driven underground: ponderous headstones of factory and warehouse keep them twisted and helpless in their graves. But London, except in paltry ways to lungs and feet, ends by overcoming any such fanciful sense of its incongruity with Nature. And that, too, not because of the excellent skies over it, the river, the wind in the smoke, the rain on the face; nor because of the fine grass that will grow through the grilles in the pavement round the trees by the National Portrait Gallery and the Gaiety Theatre, or the dock and groundsel and grass and rosebay that greedily adorn ... the crude earth and bricks of demolished buildings; but simply on account of its ancientness, its bulk, its humanity, and, arising out of these, its inevitableness as part of what the sun shines on ...

The idea that the city and nature are one isn't an idea I expected to encounter in a book published in 1883. Of course, I am relying on Thomas' interpretation of Jefferies, but it does seem to be the inevitable conclusion to Jefferies' personal philosophy as expressed in *The Story of My Heart*. If Jefferies, and indeed all humans, are part of nature, then by extension so are the things that humans create.

It's possible to argue that humans hadn't had quite the impact on the planet then as we have now (at one point in *Nature Near London*, Jefferies writes that he is convinced that small birds 'will never cease out of the land' – something we feel less certain about these days). But Jefferies was born into a world that must have still been reeling from revolutions – agricultural and industrial. The steam train is a constant presence in *Nature Near London* and appears as a sort of extension of London:

After rambling across furze and heath, or through dark fir woods; after lingering in the meadows among the buttercups... the path brings you in sight of a railway station. And the railway station, through some process of mind, presently compels you to go up on the platform, and after a little puffing and revolution of wheels you emerge at Charing Cross, or London Bridge, or Waterloo, or Ludgate Hill, and, with the freshness of the meadows still clinging to your coat, mingle with the crowd.

Later on he writes: 'It is not easy to realise in these days of quick transit and

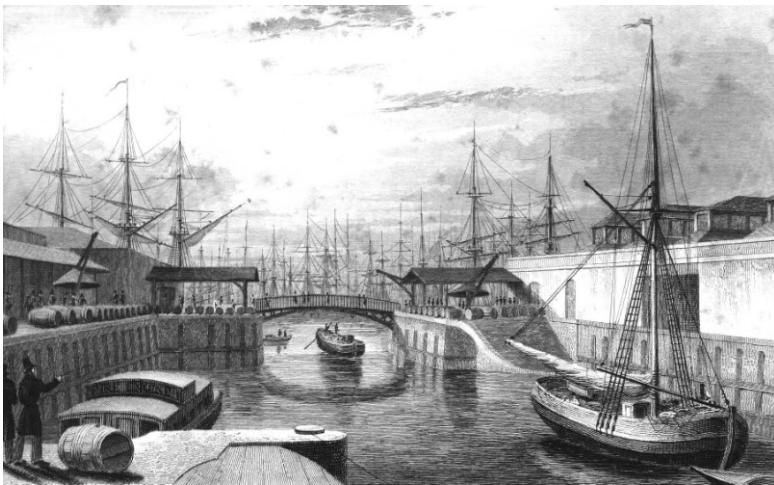
still quicker communication that old England was mostly rural.’

Jefferies was also able to recognise the naturalising effect of time. In his essay ‘Notes on Landscape Painting’, Jefferies writes about how farm machinery is eventually conquered by nature:

The earth has a way of absorbing things that are placed upon it, of drawing from them their stiff individuality of newness, and throwing over them something of her own antiquity. As the furrow smooths and brightens the share, as the mist eats away the sharpness of the iron angles, so, in a larger manner, the machines sent forth to conquer the soil are conquered by it, become a part of it, and as natural as the old, old scythe and reaping-hook. Thus already the new agriculture has grown hoar.

Jefferies was under no illusion about the ‘pristineness’ of the British countryside or our ability to project such pristineness on to the land and ever our own machines.

I’ve never found the idea that humans are separate from nature or that everything we do here is somehow unnatural very appealing. And though I’m not sure I’ve ever experienced the oneness of the universe in quite the way Jefferies did, I don’t think the interconnectedness of living systems is much disputed. Still, I find myself questioning how far down the road I can go with Jefferies. As Thomas puts it in his biography: ‘Few townsmen could accept, as Jefferies did, the Downs and the crowd by the Mansion House and the docks, not merely as theoretically all one spirit, but in his heart’. I accept it theoretically, but in my heart? I still have my doubts.



‘London Docks looking West’. Engraved by M J Darling from an original drawing by Thomas Shepherd, 1831. (National Maritime Museum)