

Ricketts, Jennie and Darwell, John (2007) Book review: Dark days. RPS Journal, 147 . p. 183.

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DARK DAYS

John Darwell, Dewi Lewis Publishing in association with Litteral Arts and Cambria Institute of the Arts, £25.00 HB, 192pp, 148 colour photos, 225x245mm, ISBN: 9781904587422

John Darwell witnessed the 2001 foot and mouth epidemic near his home in north Cumbria, and the devastating effects reverberate through the poignant images in this, his latest book. As the epic tragedy unfolded over a 12 month period, the surrounding countryside became a 'no-go' area, thousands of animals destroyed on pyres, as farmers tried to contain and eradicate the virus.

'Paradoxically beautiful' is how Liz Wells in her foreword describes a previous project, but the description could equally be applied in this case. Darwell is known for his 25 years recording the effects of change on the Cumbrian landscape, employment conditions in the Liverpool docks, and nuclear power; and this crisis in British agricultural and rural life on his doorstep would seem to be a subject designed

for him. This, his sixth book, is in keeping with his trademark style of issue-based photo documentary. Seemingly more for the gallery than news pages, the work seduces the viewer into the story with disarming colour images, before engaging us with its serious nature.

Dark Days is structured in three parts. The first maps how the Lake District fells were dosed to visitors, with images of warning signs standing in pastoral scenes, like the ominous black plastic bag tied around the head of a signpost in *Footpath Sign, Ullswater*, that would otherwise be there to guide walkers; and the assertive 'Keep Out' crudely painted onto barrels in *Farm Entrance, Southwate*; or the sign in *Drifting Smoke*, signifying the burning of cattle on pyres, warning that this normally placid country road is now enveloped by a cloud of fumes.

The second part looks at actions taken to eradicate the virus from farms, and the aftermath of the breakout. Images such as *Burning Feed Troughs*, and *Pressure Washing Cattle Sheds* depict beautiful rural landscapes through rising smoke, and against an alluring blue summer sky, juxtaposing the

disconcerting horror and beauty of the situation. Portraits of people like Robert, and Steve, who worked on animal disposal and farm cleanup, leave us to guess what will become of the hundreds of faceless others.

Part three depicts efforts to reopen the countryside and attract the public back, as in *Opening Weekend*, with a sign pointing the way to a fell access point; and *Penrith Market*, showing people wandering through a colourful array of local produce; while images such as *Derelict Tractor Beside B5305*, and *Farm Cottages for Sale, South of Carlisle*, of a for sale sign at the entrance to a farm, stand as question marks over the future of the agricultural farming community.

The book is important for those whose visual reference of the catastrophe has been gleaned from news reports, giving us the opportunity to witness the effects for ourselves and have better insight into the devastation. Documentary photography at its best, the book is masterfully designed and edited, and enhanced with expert eyewitness accounts.

Jennie Ricketts