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“The Man in the Tumulus”

By J. B. Jones

“There were grass-grown tumuli on the hills to which of old I used to walk, sit down at the foot of one of them, and think. Some warrior had been interred there in the ante-historic times.” (*The Story of My Heart*, ch. III).

The only tumulus on Liddington Hill to which this can apply is described by Mr. A. D. Passmore in, the Wilts Archaeological Magazine for 1940, thus: —

Exactly one mile slightly east of south from Liddington Castle is a small low mutilated round barrow, still about two feet high, with a shallow ditch . . . Possibly in Roman days the mound was opened by a trench; this reached the grave and the urn and bones were taken out, broken up, and scattered over a large area. Then the barrow was trenched in all directions . . . The diameter of the barrow is 43 feet.

Mr. L. V. Grinsell in a paper, entitled “The Archaeological Contributions of Richard Jefferies,” a reprint from the Transactions of the Newbury District Field Club, 1940, says: —

It would be interesting to determine with certainty which tumulus inspired Jefferies to write of, *The Story of My Heart*. It was evidently one very near to Liddington Castle. The little mound immediately south of the castle is almost certainly not one. It looks like a pillow mound and is opposite a break in the vallum. Jefferies would not have taken that for a tumulus.

The nearest barrows are a small bowl-barrow a mile south of the camp, and a large bowl-barrow a mile south-east thereof. The former was most likely where Jefferies sat and meditated.

Jefferies lacked the instinct for sociability, and had hardly any friends. It has been said that, apart from his wife, the only person he ever befriended was 'the man in the tumulus.'

Jefferies' Real Meaning

It is fortunate that we have the same barrow described by two first-rate antiquarian authorities, but the assumption that "the tumulus was evidently one very near to Liddington Castle" is, it is here and now suggested, based on a misconception of Jefferies' language. To get his real meaning it will be necessary to read the paragraph, quoted from *The Story of My Heart*, thus:—

There were grass-grown tumuli on the hills to which I used to walk, sit down at the foot of any one of them, and think.

This does not exclude Liddington nor is it maintained that it should, but a wider field is allowed. It gives access to Barbury, an alternative site for the tumulus. In his *Wild Life in a*

Southern County Jefferies refers to certain topographical features, with precision for a wander, when describing the Ridge Way to Burderop:—

Nearby (in Gipsy Lane) is an ancient tumulus on which grows a small yet obviously aged sycamore, stunted by wind and storm, and under it the holes of rabbits, drilling their habitations into the tomb of the unknown warrior . . . Above on the summit is another ancient camp (Barbury), and below two more turf-grown tumuli, low and shaped like an inverted bowl.

Either of the two last-mentioned tombs would provide a suitable location for the “man in the tumulus.” The Gipsy Lane barrow, still sycamore-crowned in 1941, is ruled in the discussion topographically, just as, for a similar reason, is Mr. Grinsell’s “large bowl-barrow, south-east of Liddington Castle.”

A Dual Application

The following quotation from *The Story of My Heart* will apply to both Liddington and Barbury. As to place-identification, one must always bear in mind Jefferies’ Turner-esque method as artist, and also that, following his long exile from his native Wilts downland, memories of the homeland must have melted somewhat into one another:—

Sweetly the summer air came up to the tumulus . . . The azure morning had spread its arms over the low tomb . . . Brown autumn dwelt in the woods beneath (either Hodson Woods; or those in the Chiseldon—Ogbourne indent); the rime of winter whitened the beech-clump on the ridge (there, are beach-clumps on both Liddington and Barbury); again the buds came on the wind-blown hawthorn bushes (these grow on both hills, but are much commoner on Barbury) . . . The Wind sighs through the grass, sighs in the sunshine; it has drifted the butterfly eastwards along the hill (Liddington Hill by the tumulus runs north and south; the east to west front of Barbury suits the term eastwards exactly); a few yards away there lies the skull of a lamb picked clean long since by crows and ants.

One may sometimes see on Barbury a crow-trap baited with a dead lamb, and have Jefferies’ words recalled with startling vividness. Not evidence for Barbury of course, but the hill is a much lonelier spot than Liddington and a likely place for such a find.

The Artist’s Licence

A more important passage is from *Round About a Great Estate* as the places there mentioned can be recognised with certainty. From the lofty, mutilated tumulus of Liddington, Jefferies looked south-westwardly over a “broad plain, beautiful with wheat;” from the less loftily situated, but shapely, tumuli beneath the recently erected Barbury Stone, he could survey to the north a still broader plain (that of Draycott—Overtown), at its extreme boundary a wood (Hodson), and beyond that the horizon lost in the summer haze (over the Cotswolds). It was one vast expanse of cereals, nothing but yellowing wheat beneath the ramparts of the hills around (Barbury—Burderop).

To one familiar with the localities in question there comes the deepening suspicion, when all is seen and said, our man in the tumulus does not sleep either at Liddington or at Barbury. But Jefferies’ “man in the tumulus” is a figment of genius, and can be accommodated at option in either bed. Shall we say that R.J., a great artist, and using the licence of one, has

redintegrated the battered Liddington tumulus by "lifting" a well-favoured barrow; from the Barbury site he knew well, and planting it, at the time he wrote *The Story of My Heart*, upon the hills which looks, down upon Coate? Why not? In that delightful last chapter of *Wood Magic* we learn, what assuredly no archaeologist has ever noted, that a grand circle of big sarsens stands by Liddington Castle close to "a little round hill (which) greatly pleased Bevis, who would have liked to carry it to his garden at home." As to the stones, they were so large that "he (Bevis) peered under and climbed over one or two and discovered that they were put in a circle."