

J B JONES: CHAMPION OF JEFFERIES

Talk given by Lady Phyllis Treitel to the Richard Jefferies Society on 3 November 1997

I HISTORY

I thought I would start, by giving an outline of the life of Joseph Barnard Jones; continue by listing his interests and his publications; then, fairly quickly, get to the part that concerns us, *viz.*, his interest in and endeavours on behalf of Richard Jefferies.

He was born in or about 1873. I have not looked him up in the records - those who like accurate details may do that - I have just taken the facts from published accounts. He was born in Somerset, in a village called Writhlington, near Radstock. His mother, who was his father's second wife, was a Miss Harriet Barnard who came from the nearby village of Wallow. He was christened Joseph Barnard, the second name after his mother, and I may as well say straightaway that he revered his mother.

She saved up the money to pay for him to go to the Borough Road Training College at Isleworth. In 1895, at the age of 22, JB got a job at a school in Swindon. Apart from holidays, he never left Swindon. Not satisfied with this teacher training he decided he must read for a degree at London University. He doesn't say, in his account, which is all set out in a chapter of Words From High Swindon entitled 'Auf Meinem Leben', but I assume that he got an external degree because I don't see how he could have financed or attended a resident degree course.

Whichever way it was, he was awarded his BA in 1900, and it was presented by the Prince of Wales. JB was so proud that he paid to take his mother (born in 1833, so 67 by this time) to the

ceremony. The whole trip is described in the chapter I have mentioned [pp32-33] and is worth reading. He had to go home to get her, take her to the nearest station, and then travel up together, second class, to London. His father had to stay behind because only one guest per student was allowed. They had a wonderful but, for her, tiring, day, and JB's father met her at Frome and took her on home.

In 1906, JB's father died and his mother, now 73 came to live with 'us' in Swindon. Yes, JB was married, though he mentions his wife so seldom that the casual reader might imagine him a bachelor. He never tells us when or whom he married but only that in the first winter old Mrs Jones spent in Wiltshire, she had a terrible cough and that 'my wife' saved her by keeping the house at an even 62 degrees. So JB had married by 1906. His mother died in 1922 aged 89. He even wrote a poem about her. I need to go into these facts because there is a charming article about JB, written after his death, by Norman Liddiard, which has an error in it. Liddiard is talking about JB's last days, and he states that in the previous year, JB had lost his mother. Now this cannot be right because JB died in 1952, so he must mean his wife. At least I assume so since old Mrs Jones died in 1922 aged 89.

If there were children of the marriage, I have not heard of them and I assume that there were none.

He remained a teacher, and his last school was Sanford St, now the offices of Mike Lusty and his men and women of the Education Department. JB seems never to have wanted to be a

headmaster. The only description of him by others, that I have seen, is in the Liddiard article -'Man and Image' : Quote 'From this silent teacher . . . seem to see.'

In 1932 or thereabouts, JB resigned for good from the teaching profession because of 'intractable sciatica'. One can make what one likes of that explanation, but it means that he retired at or just before the age of 60. He lived for another 20 -years, and it is those 20 that hold most interest for us. Whether he had always lived at number 18 St Margaret's Road I know not, but that is where he lived latterly and where he was living when first his wife died and then he died on 17 October 1952. He was, according to his obituary in WAM, 'at an advanced age'; in fact he was 79.

II INTERESTS and WRITTEN WORKS

We concern ourselves with J B Jones because he championed Jefferies and Alfred Williams, and Charles Sorley, but we cannot properly estimate him if we do not know what other skills and interests he had. As Liddiard said, in the extract I read, he loved a world of 2000 years ago, in other words he loved the classics. He was also a lover of words and of clear exposition. To Liddiard [p 29] he said, of the Swindon people around him in the hospital, in 1952, 'It's the grunting of savages. To think I spent 40 years of my life trying to teach Swindon boys something of the beauty of their native language, and then to have to hear this. It depresses me more than this illness.' If you have someone who cares deeply and loves words, you get a writer (and a reader of course), and JB did write, though seldom in a very winning way. He began by writing letters to newspapers, and articles and serials for newspapers, and then, after the war, he began publishing his own books. One of these was a historical novel: A Romano-British Wartime Diary of 407 AD. in

1949, and in the next year a pamphlet; A New View of Ermin Street.

Classics was not all. He was a mountaineer, and used to spend his holidays in the Alps, doing as much walking and climbing as he could fit in. The essays he wrote about this particular skill and passion form the main part of his book Bummerton and a Rucksack, which came out in 1946. The first part was vaguely about Swindon (which he loathed, and here calls Bummerton) but all the rest is about mountains.

He had another passion - geology - and here he had a triumph. Not a man to keep his triumphs to himself, he published a pamphlet in 1948: Swindon Hill and Recent Geology. I will try to explain. He was convinced that there were two kinds of sarsen stone in Wiltshire and that they arose quite separately from each other. A Swindon newspaper published his theory but there was no reaction. Then in 1946, an article on sarsens appeared in WAM. JB wanted to refute its statements but first tried his ideas out on the men of the Geological Survey. They laughed at him. Finally, in 1947, he was invited to set out his own theory in the pages of WAM, and immediately Dr W J Arkell D Sc. FRS pounced, realising that JB was on to something. He came down, with another geologist, and they were convinced. Another article, this time by Arkell, appeared in WAM in 1948 and JB was vindicated. Not only that, a cairn of the type of stones that he was the first to identify, was erected by Swindon Corporation and stands now at a road junction off Grey Wethers Avenue. At the end of chapter XII in his book Words From High Swindon JB thanks not only Dr Arkell, but 'Mr Town Councillor Gay without whose seasonable advocacy in the local parliament the cairn might not have materialised -if it does.' It did, in February 1952, but JB was not able to be there.

He must have been a great walker in his day because he writes so knowledgeably about the environs of Swindon, so it is not surprising that one of his pet subjects was Coate Water. In his time, it was little more than a mud flat, and he goaded the Council endlessly about returning it to the limpid splendours of Jefferies' day. Alas he was not to see it, but one of his chapters in Words From High Swindon is entitled 'The Tezzievoy', the same word that Jefferies mockingly used. He also published a pamphlet in 1944, The Coate Reservoir System, and very interesting it is, even if there are those who think that even he has not got it quite correct.

There is yet another side to J B Jones which one might not suspect - his love of his garden. I have not found out who now lives at number 18 St Margaret's Road, nor have I looked at the garden there, but in a chapter entitled 'Country in Town' (another of JB's opaque titles; merely a bleak translation of the Latin *Rus in Urbe*) in Words From High Swindon, he confides. In fact, that is why that particular book is so much more pleasing than others of his - he confides, instead of hectoring. First of course, as a geologist, he dug down until he came to the rocks {no wonder he got sciatica). Then he planted trees: beech, chestnuts, ash, pines, larches and firs from the Alps. Long before it was illegal to do so, he rooted up wood anemones, guelder rose, bracken (a great mistake) bluebells, foxgloves (they died) primroses, gorse, holly, no end to it. Somehow, into all this, he squeezed a pear tree, a plum tree, and a Bramley apple. I do wonder how much is left.

Before I come to those of his writings that most concern us here, that is those about Richard Jefferies and Alfred Williams, I should like to divert briefly and say something about JB's books in general. He was a sort of gadfly; he struck out fearlessly against

people and practices he did not approve of. For this reason, some of his written work is somewhat sharp, almost aggressive; not all but much of it. He was used to being contradicted, or even derided, by people who resented him and who usually knew less than he did. So he is not always easy to read. A second difficulty arises because he tended to issue more than one version of a story or article. Or if he had a satisfactory passage of arms with an opponent, he would put it all in print. His book on the Romans, for example, first appeared in print as a serial, and so on. It is somewhat muddling. He must have realised this because the chapters in his book about Alfred Williams, Williams of Swindon, each have their own original date, and so we see that, though the book came out in 1950, the first chapter was written in 1923, and the most recent in 1942. The easiest book to read, suggesting that he got better as he got older, is Words From High Swindon, which came out in 1951, the year before he died, when he was a mere 78. The first of his publications to interest us here this evening, however, was his pamphlet The Liddington-Barbury Memorial, of 1941, and this brings me to his heroic struggle to commemorate Richard Jefferies.

III J B Jones's support for Richard Jefferies and other writers especially Alfred Williams and Charles Sorley.

J B Jones knew, and befriended Alfred Williams. This is not the time to go into this connection but I mention it because it may have stimulated JB's wish to see justice done to Jefferies. Williams died very poor, in fact JB accused Swindonians of letting Williams starve to death. He was so angry that he wrote excoriating letters and articles, reviling the Philistinism of Williams's fellow-citizens, and these writings are gathered into the book Williams of Swindon. Again, not a seductive title.

Jones resented the way sensitive, creative, virtuous, industrious inhabitants of Swindon who stood to gain nothing by some measure of success, were either ignored, sneered at, or openly reviled by their fellows. He had experienced it himself, but he didn't care: he had his livelihood and he seems to have enjoyed, as I find some Swindon men do, a scrap.

JB was a close reader of Jefferies' writings. He does not say how he came to them, but he knew a good deal of what Jefferies wrote and had patently thought about it. The Tezzievoy is one example. He knew that no one in Swindon respected Jefferies - at least, no one with a voice. In the early months of 1938 he began writing round to influential people to get their support for a memorial to Jefferies on Liddington Hill. I assume it was to mention Williams too. The question is, why now? I have no evidence for this, but I suspect that he was prompted to do it by the erection of a sarsen stone memorial to Edward Thomas at about this time. The story of the Memorials (because there were two in the end) is hinted at in JB's pamphlet The Liddington-Barbury Memorial (1941). Query. Did someone else choose this title? But the bulk of the facts are contained in a typewritten bunch of pages never published, some of the details being perhaps too revealing for open publication. This Society holds a set of these papers, as does the Museum at Devizes. Here, unwilling to let his labours go unnoticed, JB set out the ups and downs of his campaign. It was set out briefly in the Spring Newsletter of 1996. We also possess, by the way, JB's books of newspaper cuttings, and a few other papers of his.

He began his campaign by asking the owner of the land at Liddington for permission to put a stone up, a Mr Hughes. Hughes, though not liking memorials agreed and gave permission

for access. Mrs Wilson, another interested owner, was against any such thing. JB next began his newspaper campaign and wrote to all sorts of influential people: the Bishops of Bristol and of Salisbury, the Marquess of Bath, and of Ailesbury, Mr Justice Finlay, Lord Border, May Morris of Kelmscott, H J Massingham, Reginald Arkell, Leonard Clark, Walter de la Mare, Edmund Blunden, John Betjeman, Canon Goddard, the Lord Lieutenant, the Prime Minister, Mr Chamberlain, Mrs Calley, Henry Williamson (who promised to write to The Times, but didn't) and many more. In spite of this long list, in June 1938, Mr Hughes changed his mind and refused to allow the stone on his land. Mr Raymond Thompson, who was Director of the Swindon Press, and the Editor of the Swindon Advertiser, pleaded with him but with no success. In August, JB wrote Hughes a long, eloquent, but rather insulting letter.

As a result the scheme had to be changed and the memorial was now to go on Barbury, on land graciously and promptly provided by Mrs and Miss Calley, but still JB wanted something on Liddington. He knew of the Triangulation Pillar there, and asked the Ordnance Survey if the pillar on Liddington might be used for a plaque. Major Hotine, later Colonel Hotine, gave a fairly ready 'Yes' to this suggestion in September. But they still had to get Hughes' consent. JB wrote to Hotine saying: *'A Mrs Wilson has a life interest in the Eastern half of Liddington Hill; the Western half, where your pyramid is situated, is the property of a small farmer named Hughes.'* Hotine then sent Hughes a very smooth letter outlining the idea of the plaque on the existing pillar, and offering to go and see Hughes, and perhaps Mrs Wilson. Hughes sent back a curt letter, insisting on seeing the Memorial Committee's correspondence. Hotine guessed that if Hughes saw all JB's letters he would resist, so Hotine

suggested a new letter from Thompson to the Director General of the Ordnance Survey, asking permission. To JB, Hotine wrote: *'I am afraid that this suggestion may strike you as somewhat Machiavellian, but we do, after all, want to put this scheme through, and must use the best method calculated to secure Mr Hughes' consent, short, of course, of stooping to amoral practices,'* Thompson signed a tactful letter (dated 27 August though it was already September) and sent it off. War was imminent and Hotine, a soldier, had other worries, and could not get to Swindon when, on 5 October 1938, he wrote to JB saying that Mr Hughes had given his permission. Hotine then collected the plaque himself from London, and on 18 November his man installed it on the north side of the pillar. JBJ was there: 'There was a strong wind with plenty of wild, yet not angry-looking cloud. The view into the Vale of the White Horse over Coate and South Marston was clear; Barbury, where the sarsen-stone rejected by Liddington's children of Belial is to go, looked impossibly near for four miles. From today onward, thanks to the gentlemen of the OS, Liddington Hill outwardly and visibly remembers its two dedicated spirits, its rightful function, and its glory.'

The erection of the sarsen stone on Barbury, the stone provided free by Tattersalls the owners of the Manton Training Stables, was more straightforward but the contractor took an age to cart the stone and fix it, and was finally bullied and cajoled into doing the job in October 1939, after the outbreak of the war. The two plates were not fixed on it until 14 December. Because of the war, there was no ceremony. In spite of this the Vice-chairman of the Committee, Mr Lee Osborn, well over 80, was delighted, and hoped that he and JB could baptise the stone unofficially, but Lee Osborn died a few months later. The Times of 28 December 1939 announced the installation of the two memorials,

saying that Lee Osborn chose the Alfred Williams quotation, and Henry Williamson the Jefferies one.

Other Jefferies Incidents

In Words From High Swindon, chapter V, JB recounts his friendship with a visiting teacher from France. They first met in 1939, brought together because the Frenchman, whom JB does not name, wanted to do a biography of Jefferies. After the war, in which the young man had been a soldier, they met again. He still intended to write the biography (I have no idea whether it ever got written) but in the mean time, to celebrate the Jefferies Centenary in 1948, he contributed an article on Jefferies to Les Nouvelles Litteraires. JB refers to the contents of the article, so he must have seen it, but I have so far failed to get a copy of the relevant issue of the journal. However, in the Swindon Public Library is a copy of a very modest little paperback book. It is called Adventures in new Formosa, being extracts from *Bevis*, with a commentary in French. It is by a man called Henri Kerst, and on the endpaper, at the front, is an inscription: 'En bien amical hommage a l'ami de R. Jefferies. H. Kerst.' It does not say to whom the copy of the book is given but it is my guess that Kerst was JB's French friend, and that JB gave the book to Swindon Library.

I also wonder who owns the originals of JB's letters from famous people; our files give no indication. All we have that is original is a handwritten letter from Harold Jefferies to JB dated January 1942 (not long before Harold died) commenting on the Memorial booklet and a typed letter signed by R A Butler dated 6 November 1941.

It is clear from what I have already said and from what follows that, in Swindon at least, JB was the Jefferies expert. So, in 1947, when a new edition of *Bevis* was in preparation, Geoffrey Winthrop Young was passed on by Samuel.

Looker to JB for advice about a map of Coate Water. A summary of the correspondence between these two men appeared in the RJS Journal of 1994 but the original letters from JB were lent to me for study. I must say that they show JB, now aged 74, at his most delightful. He clearly knew a great deal, much more than Winthrop Young, yet he is modest, polite, punctilious, in his replies (as you would expect) and eager to help. He is ashamed of Coate Water and wrote: *'Jefferies' reservoir has fallen upon evil days. As the main dam was condemned about 15 years ago [1932?] as being unsafe, the Swindon Corporation whose property the lake now is, lowered the water-level by the insertion of a sill at the NE end* The consequence is that the opposite and shallow end of Coate Water is a foul swamp. The Town Council has just announced that it has no intention of restoring the original level of the water, this despite a promise to do so made in 1944, The whole story is saddening and I won't dwell on it.'* 19 April 1947.

He had to lend Young his only copy of his pamphlet on Coate Reservoir as *'only a few score were printed and these are sold out'*. Otherwise he can't do too much: *'I will certainly place myself at your disposal absolutely in this matter'; 'If you think of any more questions I imagine that I can be of service, I am quite at your disposal'*; he tells Young that Jack's farm was at Chiseldon, and that 'Calais' meant Calley's cottages. Later: *'Please do not think that this requires answering. No need whatever'*. He also sent him photographs and plans of Coate Farmhouse which he had drawn himself.

And so, when this Society was formed in 1950 it is not surprising that J B Jones was a founding member. From a hint he drops somewhere he must have taken part in the 1948 celebration too, but he had not long to live. Nevertheless he wanted to play his part.

Chapter VII of Words From High Swindon is entitled 'Mysticism and Richard Jefferies'. Now, it is a brave man or woman who writes about mysticism, especially with regard to Jefferies, and I do not think that JB's article is a success. He is so determined to cite all the authorities back to Plotinus and beyond, that Jefferies is hardly mentioned. Never mind. What the book does not state is that an altered version of this article was delivered to the R J S on 12 February 1951. I learned this from a leaflet printed separately and drawn to my attention by A S Hickerton. The leaflet also states that JB was not present to give the lecture (he was probably ill) and so it was read by a Mr G A Streetly. Mr Streetly was also a member of the Society and a neighbour of JB in St Margaret's Road.

There is one more little incident; it occurred a few months before the lecture, and will fittingly end what I have to say. On 4 November 1950, the President of the new Society, Samuel Looker came to Swindon to give the Birthday-Lecture. (It was a Saturday, I may add.) Mr Harold Adams, the founder and at that time secretary of the Society was in charge of the visitor. In a letter to Edna Manning, a carbon of which is on the file, he wrote: *'We spent the afternoon (of Sunday) a little more restfully. and at night Mr Looker and I visited Mr J B Jones and spent a very interesting evening. ... On Monday morning Mr Looker and Mr J B Jones visited Barbury Castle and the Jefferies-Williams Memorial by motor car. . . .'*

I very much like the image of Mr Looker and JB chatting together in the evening and then visiting Barbury the next Morning. It seems to me an excellent place to end this modest account of one of Jefferies' most ardent supporters, I only wish I could have met him.