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J. Armitage Robinson

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**TWO GLASTONBURY LEGENDS:  
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**PLATE I**



**ST JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA**

From Screen at Plymtree, Devon

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# TWO GLASTONBURY LEGENDS:

KING ARTHUR AND ST JOSEPH  
OF ARIMATHEA

BY

J. ARMITAGE ROBINSON, D.D., F.B.A.

DEAN OF WELLS

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## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

THE following pages represent the substance of lectures given on several occasions in response to the enquiry, What is the historical truth underlying the ancient traditions which connect Joseph of Arimathea and King Arthur with the Abbey of Glastonbury? The answer to a question of this kind, if it is to be of any value, demands a patient research and the critical examination of documents. The task is laborious, but it has a peculiar fascination for those who interest themselves in the processes of the medieval mind, who are not content on the one hand to accept traditions as probably true because they were told and believed, or on the other hand to dismiss them at once as what are called monkish tales. History is not merely a record of facts: it has to do with causes and effects, with the development of ideas and the growth of institutions. The first emergence of a tradition, its enrichment by successive generations, its localisation in particular spots—all this concerns the historian, who cannot afford to neglect the gradual growth of any kind of belief. Considered from this point of view the *residuum* of fact which may be shewn to underlie a local tradition is less important than the discovery of the stages through which the tradition has passed, and the causes which appear to have determined its development.

It is in this spirit that I have approached the study of these venerable legends. I have dealt first with King Arthur, because his name is the first to appear in the

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documents from which our evidence is drawn. Moreover the full story of Joseph of Arimathea will be found to be closely bound up with a particular branch of the Arthurian legend.

It will be convenient here to say a few explanatory words as to the more important of the writers on whom we shall have to rely. WILLIAM OF MALMESBURY is commonly quoted as the principal source of our information. The great historian stayed for a time about the year 1125 with the monks of Glastonbury. He made a careful examination of their records, especially their early charters, and wrote a small treatise *On the Antiquity of the Church of Glastonbury*. There are those who have declared that in deference to the feelings of his kindly hosts he allowed himself to set down their current traditions without much concern as to their historical worth. But more recent study has shewn that the form in which his work has been preserved to us, in a single manuscript of the middle of the thirteenth century, is very far from being the form which its author gave to it. It has been altered and enlarged by a series of monastic scribes, with the more or less laudable intention of keeping it up to date. It is with the original form of the book as recovered by critical investigations that we are in the first instance concerned.

A younger contemporary of William of Malmesbury is GEOFFREY OF MONMOUTH, who about the year 1135 wrote his *History of the Kings of Britain*. This extraordinary work was declared to be the translation of a British book: in any case it contains much Celtic legend in a highly embellished form, and gives us the first full account of Arthur and his heroic deeds.

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Another Welshman was GIRALDUS CAMBRENSIS, a great controversialist and a piquant if not very trustworthy writer, whose literary activity covered some forty years, and who died about 1216.

Two Glastonbury monks are also among our historical authorities: ADAM OF DOMERHAM, who wrote a *History of Glastonbury* in continuation of William of Malmesbury's book down to 1291; and JOHN OF GLASTONBURY who, writing towards the end of the fourteenth century, embodied the works of his two predecessors in a much altered form, and carried on the history to 1342.

It remains only to be said that I am indebted to the kindness of a friend who has facilitated the production of this little book, and also to the skill of Dom Ethelbert Horne of Downside Abbey whose camera has helped to provide the illustrations.

J. ARMITAGE ROBINSON

*Easter, 1926*

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This yet in the meane time pleaseth me, that while we  
intreate of *Arthure* and of things done by him, *Glas-*  
*tenbury* is alwaies at hand, and most friendly promiseth  
his endeavour towards assured knowledge of things.  
From whence in deede all the fruite of our labour at  
this present is to be fetcht, as it were from a most  
plentifull running fountaine.

JOHN LELAND



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## ST JOSEPH OF ARIMATHEA

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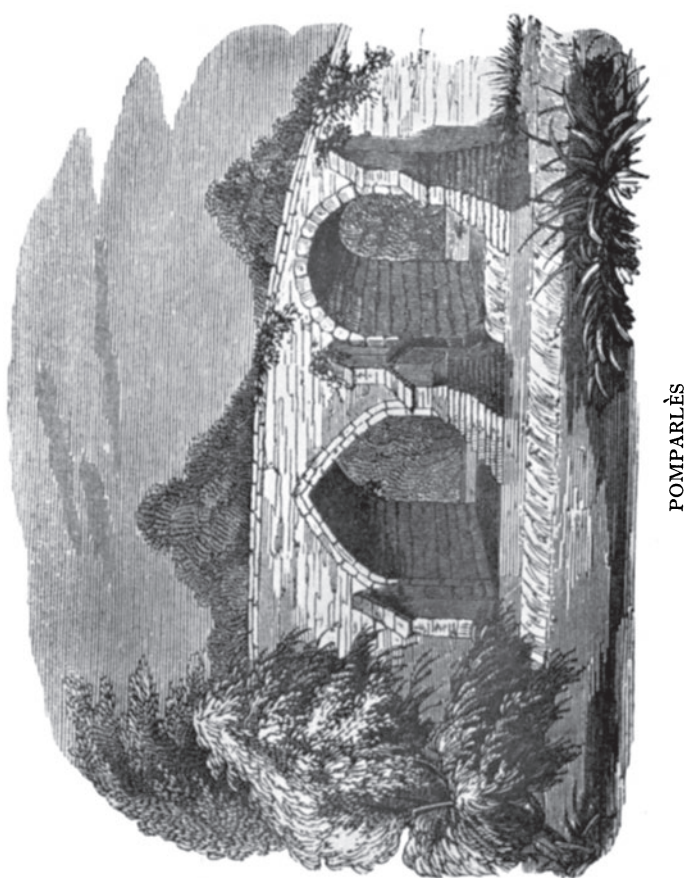
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PLATE II



POMPARLÈS