

JONES, WALTER DAVID MICHAEL (1895-1974), painter and poet

Name: Walter David Michael Jones
Date of birth: 1895
Date of death: 1974
Gender: Male
Occupation: painter and poet
Area of activity: Art and Architecture; Poetry
Author: Luke Thurston

David Jones is one of the great literary artists of British modernism, as well as being an important engraver, illustrator and painter, and an accomplished essayist. He was born in Brockley, Kent, on 1 November 1895, the third child of James and Alice Jones, and baptized Walter David (by the age of nine he had succeeded in dropping his first name, which he considered too Anglo-Saxon). When he converted to Catholicism in 1921, he took the additional name of Michael. His father James Jones (1860-1943) was a native of Holywell, Flintshire, who moved to London in 1883 to work as a printer for the *Christian Herald*. His mother, Alice Ann (1856-1937), was the daughter of Ebenezer Bradshaw, a Rotherhithe ship-builder and mast-maker, and claimed Italian ancestry on the maternal side; before her marriage, she had worked as a governess. In 1910, the family suffered the tragic loss of Harold, David's elder brother, who died of tuberculosis.

In 1909, at the age of fourteen Jones began studying at the Camberwell School of Art. He was taught draughtsmanship by A. S. Hartrick, who introduced him to Walter Sickert, a crucial artistic influence whom Jones got to know quite well in later years. Hartrick also opened the young student's eyes to the latest developments in Post-Impressionist painting (although at this stage, Jones commented, he was 'completely muddle-headed as to the function of the arts in general'). With the outbreak of war in August 1914, Jones decided to enlist - though he was rejected twice, and it was not until January 1915 that he joined the 15th 'London Welsh' Battalion of the Royal Welch Fusiliers. He served as a private at the front from December 1915, taking part in the battle of Mametz Wood in July 1916 (of which he gives a poetic account in *In Parenthesis*). Due to injury and illness, Jones had periods of convalescence in England during the war, but each time he returned to his battalion in France. At the end of the war in November 1918, Jones was transferred to Limerick for the onerous and unpleasant task of maintaining order during the Irish uprising.

It was not until January 1919 that Jones was demobilized; and thanks to an ex-serviceman's grant he was then able to resume his studies at Westminster School of Art. During his time as a student there, Jones began attending Catholic Mass at the nearby Westminster Cathedral, and in September 1921 he converted to Catholicism (to his dissenting Protestant father's great consternation). Jones had been especially moved, during the war, by accidentally witnessing a priest giving Mass to soldiers in a ruined outhouse near the front: indeed, the moment became for him a veritable epiphany or spiritual turning-point. In January 1921 he met Eric Gill, a recent convert to Catholicism whose aesthetic-religious vision and artistic practice was to have an overwhelming influence on Jones. Throughout the 1920s Jones was closely involved with Gill's 'religious fraternity', a group of Catholic artists and craftsmen based first at Ditchling in Sussex and then, from 1924 to 1928, at Capel-y-ffin in the Black Mountains. Working with Gill, Jones learnt the skills of wood engraving, lettering and printing, and took part in extended group discussions on theology, philosophy and the theory of art. In 1924, he got engaged to Petra, one of Gill's daughters; the engagement lasted until 1927, when she broke it off. Although Jones had many friendships with women (and was often passionately in love), he remained a lifelong bachelor.

In 1928, Jones accompanied Gill on a visit to France, after which he experienced an intense period of artistic creativity, lasting until 1932, in which he produced hundreds of paintings and the first draft of *In Parenthesis*. This period also saw the burgeoning of Jones's close friendships, especially with Harman Grisewood, Jim Ede and Tom Burns, a group of young Catholic intellectuals based in London. He also became passionately attached to the aristocratic Prudence Pelham, and began to receive financial assistance from the wealthy patroness Helen Sutherland. A member of Ben Nicholson's 'Seven and Five Society', during these years Jones showed his work in a number of prestigious exhibitions.

In 1932 Jones suffered a serious nervous breakdown, with a prolonged period of insomnia that prevented him from working for several years and left him prey to a depressive condition (which he nicknamed 'Rosie') that would recur episodically throughout the rest of his life. This illness severely delayed the completion of *In Parenthesis*, which was not published (by Faber) until 1937. The book, when it at last appeared, won high praise from T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats, and in 1938 it was awarded the Hawthornden Prize.

In Parenthesis is perhaps the major modernist treatment of a soldier's actual experience during the First World War. Freely mixing prose and verse, the text tells the story of John Ball, an everyman soldier, and 'the many men so beautiful' who served alongside him. Jones's writing is littered with allusions to Hopkins, Lewis Carroll, Coleridge, Shakespeare, Malory and Y Gododdin, as well as to modernists like Eliot and Joyce. The complexity of the poem - its concern with the antagonisms and divergences of British culture across history, its sense of the war as an uncanny, revelatory ordeal for that culture - is given voice at one point by the mythical persona Dai Greatcoat, who 'articulates his English with an alien care,' addressing the reader directly with 'You ought to ask: Why, / what is this, / what's the meaning of this.' In this ambiguity - with 'this' either the poem or the war - we see Jones deploying the interpretive difficulty of his modernist style as a way of remaining faithful to the fundamental enigma of the war, its unprecedented challenge to the very structure of human self-understanding. Given the long-delayed publication of *In Parenthesis*, with another war looming, Jones saw his poem as an urgent message to his contemporaries (he sent a copy to the prime minister Neville Chamberlain).

During the Second World War Jones chose (somewhat courageously) to remain in London and continued to work with some success as both painter and writer, publishing several essays and frequently exhibiting his works. In 1944 he developed the new technique of painted inscriptions, in which a text is transformed, using paint and wax crayon, to make the letters seem as though carved in ancient stone. By the end of the war, in fact, Jones had become one of the leading figures of contemporary British art.

In 1946, Jones suffered his second major breakdown, and from the spring of 1947 he spent six months in Bowden House, a psychiatric nursing home in north London, where he was treated by psychotherapist Dr Bill Stevenson; it was not until January 1948 that he was able to return to living independently. Continuing to work hard as both painter and writer, Jones published a number of reviews and essays, and in 1951 completed his second major literary work, *The Anathemata*. This long, fragmentary text - 'very probably the finest long poem written in English this century,' wrote W. H. Auden - is Jones's most ambitious work. A 'great wandering work' (as Thomas Dilworth describes it), it unfolds a densely intertextual meditation on 'the Matter of Britain', moving across a dizzying range of contexts, from geological to cultural, from historical to mythical. A central section, 'Redriff', features Eb Bradshaw, Jones's maternal grandfather, who voices his wise resistance to divisive ideologies. As the poem begins with the elevation of the host at Mass, so it culminates with the priest's lifting of the chalice, inscribing its central theme as a circular, redemptive Christian structure.

'Wales', writes Pennar Davies, 'is integral to David Jones's thought.' Jones strongly identified with his Welsh father's culture and ancestry, and through his later friendships with Saunders Lewis and Valerie Wynne-Williams became involved with discussions of Welsh nationalism and the emergence of Plaid Cymru. But he always saw the campaign for Welsh cultural and political autonomy as part of 'the Matter of Britain': in other words, he linked it to what he saw as a vital tradition of religious and artistic life that had flourished in the pre-modern Celtic cultures of these islands and still persisted in some artistic practices of modern times. It was that tradition that Jones sought both to recall and to celebrate in his painting and in the 'multifaceted harmony' (Dilworth) of his writing.

Jones was appointed CBE in 1955 and Companion of Honour in 1974. His work won many prizes and awards, and he received the honorary degree of DLitt from the University of Wales in 1960. He died on 28 October 1974 at the Calvary Nursing Home in Sudbury Hill, Harrow, after some years of increasing illness.

Author

Luke Thurston

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Further Reading

Belinda Humfrey and Anne Price-Owen, *David Jones: diversity in unity* (Cardiff 2000)
Wikipedia Article: [David Jones](#)

Additional Links

NLW Archives: [David Jones \(Artist and Writer\) Papers](#)
VIAF: [89122331](#)
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