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**Jones, David (1895-1974)**

**Timeline**

1895 – Born in Brockley, Kent

1915 – After several years at Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts he enlists in the Welch Fusiliers

1916 – Is wounded in the attack on Mametz Wood

1921 – Enters the Roman Catholic Church and becomes a member of Eric Gill’s Catholic artists’ community at Ditchling

1932 – Suffers a severe breakdown; another attack will incapacitate him in 1947

1937 – Publishes *In Parenthesis*, his first major literary production

1952 – Completes *The Anathemata*

1954 – First major retrospective exhibition of his artistic work takes place at the National Museum of Wales and the Tate Gallery

1974 –Dies at Sudbury Hill, Harrow

**Entry**

David Jones, the poet, painter and engraver, was born in Brockley, Kent, in 1895, the youngest son of James Jones, a printer’s overseer from North Wales, and Alice Bradshaw, a former governess and talented amateur artist of Anglo-Italian descent. Although his family was English speaking and Low Church in religious practice, from an early age Jones was drawn to the culture of his father’s Welsh ancestors, and to the rituals of the Catholic Church (he was to convert in 1921). Both influences would prove crucial to Jones’s maturity as both artist and writer.

In January 1915, after several years training as an artist at Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts, Jones enlisted in the ‘London-Welsh’ battalion of the Royal Welch Fusiliers, and served as a private until the end of the Great War. He was wounded in the leg during the assault on Mametz Wood, as part of the 1916 Somme Offensive. These experiences would serve as the narrative basis of his first major literary work, *In Parenthesis* (1937). Though that title was meant to convey his understanding of the war as a kind of parenthesised experience for Jones and his fellow amateur soldiers, he remained, artistically, unable to step outside of its brackets, and each of his major subsequent works would be shaped by his time in the trenches.

Arguably the finest poet-painter since William Blake, Jones’s corpus took three main forms. First there is the large and varied body of visual art, which reached its early maturity with the bold woodcuts of the post-war years, and the softly-etched steel plate work of the later 1920s. Many of these engravings were book illustrations commissioned by fine-art presses, and often reflected his religious faith and interest in mythic subjects and early British literature. His paintings, which increased in volume and scale after his deteriorating eyesight caused him to abandon engraving in 1930, are characterised by strong lines and powerful forms in his early work, and delicate colours and busy intricacy in his later output. Several of his most famous paintings – *Manwydan’s Glass Door* (1931), *Guinevere* (1940), *Aphrodite in Aulis* (1941), and *Trystan ac Essyllt* (1962) – are complex, thematically-layered images which boldly reinterpret their mythic subjects through contemporary allusions, theological connections, and historic and literary associations.

Jones turned to writing only after he had achieved fame as a visual artist. *In Parenthesis* (1937), his first published work,tells the story of Private John Ball (a thinly fictionalised self-portrait of the author) and his Anglo-Welsh battalion from their embarkation from Britain in December 1915 to their catastrophic attack on Mametz Wood the following July. Epic in scale, and elegiac in tone, it is one of the few English-language modernist works to focus directly on private soldiers’ experience of trench warfare. It is also a consummately British (or at least Anglo-Welsh) work of modernist art, in which medieval Welsh poetry is fused with Shakespearian drama, Romantic verse, and Cockney rhyming slang. It received universal praise in its early reviews, and won the Hawthornden Prize in 1938. Jones’s next published book, *The Anathemata* (1952), was described by W.H. Auden as ‘very probably the finest long poem written in English this century’. A broad and difficult text, it traces various traditions of British and European culture unified by the image of the Mass. Jones continued to work on a series of interconnected shorter poems throughout the remainder of his life (many were published posthumously); he also published many essays and long reviews which expounded his theory of art and the function of the artist.

Jones’s final body of work are the calligraphic inscriptions he began in the 1940s. In his images of words on painted backgrounds, made in pencil, crayon, watercolour and ink, he devised a new art form – one which suggested centuries of British writings. His thin angular lettering recalls ancient writings carved in stone, while his use of colour echoes the illuminations of medieval manuscripts; his choice of languages reflected all those spoken south of the Antonine Wall – Latin, Welsh, English and Old French; and his choice of quoted texts ranged from the Gospels and the Catholic liturgy, to contemporary verse and the Anglo-Saxon *Dream of the Rood*. Some were gifted as birthday presents to close friends: Eliot received one for his seventieth birthday, which consisted of various texts related to the wasted land – including Eliot’s epigraph from his famous 1922 poem, the medieval French *Parceval*, the Welsh *Manawydan ap Llyr*, and Malory’s *Morte Darthur*. Others had more potent purposes, such as *Cara Wallia Derelicta* (1959), which takes the form of a lament for the death in battle in 1282 of Llywelyn ap Gruffydd, the last Prince of Wales, and the political extinction of Wales as an independent nation. Here the text is taken from two medieval Welsh poems and the description of the fall of Troy in the *Aeneid.* Jones translated the title of this late and powerfully tragic poem-painting as ‘poor old Wales buggered up’.

**References and further reading**

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