

David Jones and the Celtic Tradition in English Literature

By Thomas Dilworth

David Jones was as Welsh as anyone could be who was not Welsh. In later years he enjoyed being called Welsh or a Welshman, but he was born in Brockley, a suburb of London, and raised there by an English mother and a North Welsh father. David Jones identified with his father's nation, but cannot even be called Anglo-Welsh since cumulatively he spent little more than two of his seventy eight years living in Wales. There were three or four childhood holidays in North Wales, the summer of 1913 in Tragaron, eight months of basic training in 1915 in Llandudno, and, off and on, in 1925-7 fourteen months in Capel-y-ffin and on Caldey Island. Yet identification with Wales inspired much of his early reading, conditioned his sense of self, informed his artistic sensibility, and led him to discern what may be a stream of Celtic sensitivity in English Literature.

At Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts in the four years before the Great War, he had a remarkable teacher, A.S. Hartrick, who had been a friend of Van Gogh, Guigan, and Toulouse-Lautrec. The son of a North Welsh mother and a Scottish father, Hartrick regarded his Celtic blood as the source of his own artistic inclinations. One day in the British Museum, he showed his students the La Tène bronze Battersea shield in the Celtic collection, turned to young David Jones, and said, 'They knew what they were up to, Jones.' His pupil would always admire this shield—which, he later wrote "looks at first sight wholly symmetric but actually each of the applied 'decorative' spiral floriations etc. are other from each other."¹ This tension between symmetry and variety informs his art and poetry. His admiration for Celtic aesthetics was lifelong. Half a century later, the illustrations in Francoise Henry's *Irish Art of the Early Christian*

Period (1966) prompted him to exclaim, ‘What miraculous stuff it was. The extreme sensitivity ... within those vigorous, technically perfect, hard, exacting, abstract forms—it was a most extraordinary phenomenon.’² He saw his own work as part of a Celtic tradition in visual and literary art, and, in doing so, discerned what I call (he never did) a Celtic tradition in English literature.

After unity, these are the attributes Jones most valued in literary and visual art: inclusiveness; intimate, affectionate particularity; Aristotelian realism (in contrast to Platonic idealism); textural richness, and a sense of movement. By 1928 these values informed his visual art as they were beginning to inform his great war epic *In Parenthesis*, which he began writing in that year. While composing this work, he recognized these values as characterizing what he saw as an imaginative, primary literary tradition, which he felt was Celtic and which, he thought, consisted most prominently (since the Renaissance, at least) of Shakespeare, the Metaphysical Poets, Kit Smart, William Blake, S.T. Coleridge, Lewis Carroll, Gerard Manley Hopkins, and James Joyce.

In Britain, this tradition was originally pre-Anglo Saxon Brythonic and, subsequently, Welsh. Jones writes,

I am persuaded that there is a valid “Welsh” strain in English Lit & tradition which is rather, perhaps, now, overlooked. It is obscure & not easily defined—but I mean it was present with Camden & Drayton & those people—& Milton felt it (although I’m glad he did not do his proposed “Arthuriad,” except that it might have stopped Tennyson doing his!). Blake certainly was aware of it, & the PreRaphaelites in their way—but already a bit tinged with that horrible “Celtic twilight” idea. Perhaps the “Teutonic” school of the 19th Cent. historians did a good bit to break the continuity of the thing I mean in one sense. For them, the History of the Island began with the landing of the Saxon pirates; and Ebbsflet

became more sacred than Glastonbury—but this was a new thing & I imagine was a point of view that would have surprised Shakespeare.³

Of Shakespeare's plays he most liked *King Lear*, partly for its sense of Lear being originally the Celtic Llyr or Lir, a god of elements and the sea, “so Shakespeare was continuing a very ancient tradition in associating ‘King Lear’ with tempest & storm.”⁴

The original source of this Celtic tradition was, Jones writes to his friend Jim Ede, the “flexible, complex, hard, exact, ‘abstract’ art” that “characterized the works of Celtdom” in “the Hallstatt and La Tene cultures of the first millennium BC and again in the resurgent sub or post Roman Xtian-Celtic cultures in the 5th or 6th or 7th or following centuries AD, especially in Ireland (Kells Gospel Book, etc).”⁵ In its early Welsh written manifestations, this tradition involved a “metamorphic quality.” For him, the paramount modern manifestation of the tradition was not visual and not English but the Irish writer James Joyce “in his incredible way and in a totally other medium and still more differing intention.”⁶

According to Jones, this Celtic tradition has nothing to do with the whimsy of the Celtic Twilight and modern Arthurian fantasies:

The spirit & mood of the early Welsh fragments (which ... I only know by translation—& I suspect, not very good translation) is one of “realism” of a kind—a kind of caustic observation & rather amused bitterness—but resigned also—rather more in the mood of those very early warrior Chinese poems that Arthur W[aley] has translated.⁷

This quality is the Celtic counterpart to Aristotelian realism, which Jones considered as basic to his own art and, pre-eminently, that of Joyce. Although the medieval Welsh tales in *The Mabinogion* involve a shift to fantasy, he thought one of its stories, “Kulwch and Olwen,” “one

of the best ... of the kind in the world” and loved it for the realistic aspect of what might be called its magic realism.⁸ He thought that

what distinguishes this native prose-tale from the subsequent great medieval Arthurian Romance-Cycles is its vivid sense of the particular, the actual, the tangible. The exact topography and terrain is in strong contrast to the vague and generalized topography of the Romances So that though it is interweaved with marvels & mysterious powers, the narrative reads in a perfectly matter-of-fact fashion. We are in no doubt as to who is getting the worst of it or at what site the changing fortunes occur. In *that* sense it is as precise as an eye-witness report of the Boat Race telling us which of the contestants is in most trouble & whether that trouble is by Fulham Wall or Dukes Meadow.⁹

The story exemplifies one of his favourite maxims, that “we proceed from the known to the unknown.” For most readers, he thought, the “known” realistic aspect might seem unCeltic, because, since

the “Romantic revival,” the idea behind the expression “the Celtic twilight” and much besides has occluded, indeed reversed the characteristic qualities of authentic Celticity. There have been such oceans of bogus stuff, so many misconceptions which the accidents of history have done much to occasion, that it is small wonder that this matter is confused. Who on earth would suspect these qualities from the general attitude of the modern Irishman? The same applies to Wales.

Celtic-Twilight-induced fantasy was one reason he would be unable to read with full enjoyment the Anglo-Welsh novelist John Cowper Powys.¹⁰

He saw the Celtic aesthetic as more than realism, however. In a personal manifesto written at Rock for Ede in 1935, he identifies his own intentions with subtler aspects of the Celtic tradition:

I should like to speak of a quality which I rather associate with the folk-tales of Welsh or other Celtic derivation, a quality congenial and significant to me which in some oblique way has some connection with what I want in painting.

I find it impossible to define, but it has to do with a certain affection for the intimate creatureliness of things—a care for, and appreciation of, the particular genius of places, men, trees, animals, and yet withal a pervading sense of metamorphosis and mutability. That trees are men walking. That words “bind and loose material things.” I think Carroll’s Alice Books and the Hunting of the Snark inherit, through what channel I do not know, something akin to this particular quality of the Celtic tales.

The Snark is always a Boojum in Celtic legend, and tragically so in much Celtic history. The Hunting of the Snark has for me an affinity to the Gododdin of Aneurin and the Hunting of the Boar Trwyth in the Olwen tale, and the Grail Quest also.¹¹

He associates the Celtic motif of metamorphosis with a combination of contraries:

If you would draw a bruiser don’t neglect to remember the fragility of “this flesh” or you will be liable to make only a vulgar tour-de-force and to obscure the essential humanity of your gross man. There should be always a bit of lion in your lamb. The successful art work is one where no ingredient of creation is lost, where no item on the list in *the Benedicite Omnia Opera Dominum* is denied or forgotten.¹²

Celtic influence could be detected, he thought, in works of English literature that had vividness of imagery and a woven texture, an emerging and disappearing movement “like tangled brush with cats coming & going.” He saw this texture in “all of Julian of Norwich,” in Malory where Lancelot visits Chapel Perilous, in much of Shakespeare, in *The Rime of the*

Ancient Mariner, in the verse at the end of “Christabel,” and in the writings of Lewis Carroll (*Letters to a Friend* 87).

It is no coincidence that he was revising *In Parenthesis* while first formulating these thoughts. As an infantryman, he had begun to notice affinity between the form-content of some of the earliest Welsh writing and the wet wasteland of the Western Front. In his important essay “The Myth of Arthur,” he writes of Taliesin’s poem “The Spoils of Hades” that “the setting is amphibious, a place of islands, and necks of land, ... of transparency and extreme cold, unstable, with lights shining, which (like those familiar Very lights slowly gyrating over a 1916 ... Flanders field) coldly illumine, but do not clarify the scene” (*Epoch and Artist* 237). And he continues,

The folk tradition of the insular Celts seems to present to the mind a half-aquatic world—it is one of its most fascinating characteristics—it introduces a feeling of transparency and interpenetration of one element with another, of transposition and metamorphosis. The hedges of mist vanish or come again under the application of magic, such as Geraint ab Erbin encountered, just as the mists over peat-bog and tarn and traeth disclose or lose before our eyes drifting stumps and tussocks. It is unstable, the islands float, where a *caer* or a *llys* now is a glassy expanse (239).

By the mid-1920s he had achieved something like this “interpenetration” of elements in his watercolour paintings. But the setting of much of *In Parenthesis* is also such a place of metamorphosis, and the form of the poem suits its setting by modulating between differing registers of language and between different imaginative levels (realism, romance, and myth). After its publication, he would say that *In Parenthesis* is in this Celtic tradition.¹³ His second

long poem, *The Anathemata* (1952) and his later mid-length poems would also be in this tradition.

It was a tradition that, he thought, had positively influenced English visual art. He saw as a Celtic quality a sense of intimacy in English painting that French painting lacks. He saw it in the Stuart needlework in the Victoria and Albert Museum, especially the embroidered linen caps with pearls for young girls “that are,” he thought, “very Nonney Noe.”¹⁴ In his opinion, “the best stuff that the English nation has produced artistically” is its embroidery, famous in the Middle Ages as *Opus Anglicanum*.¹⁵ He saw the Celtic strain in much of Samuel Palmer’s work, including *Bright Cloud*, though he thought that a bad painting. His own visual art is, in this sense, English, though he regarded it as less so for his having inculcated “faded academism, the last dregs of the Classical tradition” and later Impressionism & the early years of post-Impressionism—the ‘school’ of Paris etc. etc. Nevertheless,” he writes, “even I have this feeling of wanting to include ‘everything’; ‘the whole’ in such works as I’ve tried to make ... I mean the entirety or totality in a little place or space” (*Letters to a Friend*, 80-1).

He saw Celticity and therefore true Britishness as present stylistically in “homely” English things. These did *not* include the English Bible, which “superb as it is, tragically misses the real fragrance of our real goods—it’s apt to hit on the chest & beat on the ears like Milton—blast him.”¹⁶ He preferred Wycliffe’s translation of scripture “in that unaffected English” (“more *potent* than the A.V, less smoothed out & less donnish”) and regretted its being virtually unobtainable.^{17*} To him, truly English (at heart Celtic) works are

always a *loving* “*handled*” “*textured*” free-flowing affair with a bit of thunder-storm-

* He thought the Wycliffe version of the parable of the prodigal son in *The Oxford Book of English Prose* ‘a knock out.’ A friend had once lent him a copy of the entire Wycliffe New Testament and he found it ‘terrific’ (Letter to Tony Stoneburner, n.d. c. 1968).

behind-an-apple-tree—linear-tentative-not large-*packed* with life a bit of a joke—
speckled—like a large thrush’s breast & spear points in a garden. ... It is the work of a
motley race with Kent gardens & Capel-y-ffin darkneses within a day’s walk ...—it’s a
patch-work quilt in a way, on the bed of a princess with a dead dog on the mat. “In scarlet
town where I was born” & “the cruel ships carpenter” & all that no less than “this battle
fares like to the morning’s war”—I rather fancy that the Bros Adams got a *kind* of English
thing in their how-ever-so-much derived-from-Europe classicism (like Dick Wilson)—& I
think that our Ben [Nicholson], even when he thinks he’s most “Paris” & what not has it
very markedly.¹⁸

He believed that the Puritan Revolution largely destroyed Celtic Britishness as a major
current within English creativity. Aiding and abetting this destruction were the foreign influences
in the Jacobean and in neo-Classicism and Alexander Pope, which virtually obliterated the
essential, elusive qualities that had informed British art and literature from the remote early
Welsh (of Anglo-Saxon times) and the earlier Celtic past. The great eighteenth-century English
painters and “what I suppose floods Burlington House is the counterpart to the English-bible-
Milton business” and not at all, in this sense, authentically British.

Aesthetic literary Britishness survived, he thought, in the common songs where roses, death
and bridal nights are vitally, incongruously joined. The real thing is there “to make you weep,”
he said, in the early medieval works; then becomes heavy and dull in the later Middle Ages; then,
with Shakespeare and the Metaphysical poets, “happy, prouder, conscious, & having a regular
fine old fling.” It is significant, he thought, that the English Metaphysical poets were largely
Welsh by descent. Not that their achievement was simply Welsh. It resulted, he thought, from

Welshness meeting Englishness in imaginative transformation.[†] This later happened in reverse, when Englishness met Welshness in the poetry of Hopkins.

Kit Smart, Coleridge, the romantic revival picks it up only half—Blake with both hands & feet & so violently as to remould it with some quite other thing—immensely great & alone—but it was all British raw material. I think some of the PreRaphaelites recognized the thing but for some reason or other & many reasons just got every cart before all the wrong horses & so—bloody pathetic affair.¹⁹

It was only “by a kind of ‘pseudomorphosis’,” he thought, that Hopkins so clearly revives “this ‘Celtic’ thing of demanding intricate & complex forms of compactness and precision and producing in his case, because of his great poetic genius, works which astonish, not only by their power but by their delicacy.” Considering the Victorian age and the institutional culture of the Jesuits, he thought Hopkins’s poetry “a bloody miracle.”²⁰

Because the qualities that he considered Celtic were what he most loved in visual art as well as in literature, there was, he said, no English “painter or draughtstman who I would rise from my bed to look at with any certainty of reward since Blake.”²¹ It was the denial of British Celticity in modern English writing and painting that convinced him, as much as anything else, of contemporary cultural decline.

In his own painting, he was Celtic in this sense, and it involved his seeing and re-presenting small particulars. In his vision, whether a centre of attention or not, every detail resists being merely

[†] He writes in 1962 to Vernon Watkins, ‘It looks to me as though some fusion took place in the aristocratic poets of the Welsh-border in the 16th-17th Centuries between something that was, in part, ‘Welsh’ and the new Counter-Reformation ... mystical tradition from the Continent, affecting Vaughan, Traherne, Herbert, Crashaw, Carew, Donne, perhaps Keffyn ... all these men were either Cornish or Welsh. None were ‘English’ (*Letters to a Friend* 81-2).’ Of these poets, his favourite was Donne, in whom he had read a good deal, including ‘that heavenly thing’ *Satire II* (Letter to Harman Grisewood, 14 February 1938).

part of a whole. He regarded the love of small, “deep down things,” which Hopkins celebrated, as distinctively Celtic and right. Each exists for its own sake, subsumed in a larger relaxed unity, which is not dominating or controlling in a way that diminishes the small parts. In this regard, his paintings express love, not power. It is a form not so much imagined or given as discovered, partly by accident, through judicious muddling and, in Jones, the least dictatorial of sensibilities.

His long view of British art and literature is a remarkable critical-theoretical synthesis. How it illuminates British culture throughout history is a matter for further consideration and debate. Many of the qualities he valued can be found in Homer and are therefore not exclusively Celtic but probably distinctive of sophisticated art in any vital, largely oral culture. Yet the Celts had these qualities in what seems an undeniably rich tradition of visual, musical, and literary arts. Certainly, Jones’s theory indicates qualities that characterize his own work and, it is fair to say, make it more distinctively British than that of any other modern English painter (with the possible exception of his friend Stanley Spencer) and more than any other modern English writer.

Works Cited

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Endnotes

¹ David Jones, letter to Harman Grisewood 17 December 1970. The letters to Grisewood are in the Beinecke Library, Yale University. I am grateful to the trustees of David Jones's estate for permission to quote from his unpublished letters.

² David Jones, letter to Arthur Giardelli 13 July 1966. The letters to Giardelli are in the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

³ David Jones, letter to Berje [?] de Zoete 20 October 1938, in the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

⁴ To Jim Ede 16 November 1952. The letters to Ede are in Kettle's Yard, Cambridge.

⁵ David Jones, letter to Jim Ede 15 April 1943.

⁶ David Jones, letter to Peter Levi 24 May 1964. The letters to Levi are in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

⁷ David Jones, letter to Berje [?] de Zoete 20 October 1938.

⁸ Ms note nd c. 1964, in the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

⁹ David Jones, letter to Peter Levi 24 May 1964.

¹⁰ David Jones, letter to Fr Michael Hanbury 30 March 1963, in the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

¹¹ David Jones, "Life for J. Ede," typescript 5 September 1935, in Kettle's Yard, Cambridge.

¹² David Jones, letter to Jim Ede 18 January 1934.

¹³ David Jones, letter to Jim Ede 15 April 1943.

¹⁴ David Jones, letter to Jim Ede 18 January 1934.

¹⁵ David Jones, letter to Janet Stone 20 November 1963, in the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

¹⁶ David Jones, letter to Jim Ede 18 January 1934.

¹⁷ David Jones, letter to Tony Stoneburner, draft frag n.d. c. 1968, in the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

¹⁸ David Jones, letter to *The Times* draft nd, in the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

¹⁹ David Jones, letters to Jim Ede 18 January 1934.

²⁰ David Jones, letter to Jim Ede 15 April 1943. Jones's letters to Grisewood (including the one cited in the footnote) are in the Beinecke Library, Yale.

²¹ David Jones, letter to Jim Ede 18 January 1934.