

DAVID JONES: WRITER AND ARTIST by Keith Alldritt, *Constable, London, 2003, Pp. xii + 208, £20.00, hbk.*

It is remarkable that, 30 years after his death, this is the first book-length biography of David Jones. Widely acknowledged as a significant painter and engraver and as a major poet, Jones's life is interesting on many counts: a boy from a working-class background who was educationally backward yet whose natural ability to draw gained him entry to the Camberwell School of Art at only 14 years of age; a soldier on the Western Front who was wounded in action; a convert to Catholicism despite his father's vehement opposition to it; an associate of Eric Gill at both Ditchling and Capel-y-ffin, who was for a while engaged to his daughter and remained his friend for life; a sensuous man, strongly attracted towards women, and possessing the intelligence, kindness, charm and wit which one would expect to win their favour, who yet remained a bachelor and probably a virgin; someone whose distress at witnessing the decay of European civilisation caused him to reject most modern innovations and eventually to live almost as a recluse. In the Preface, Alldritt states that he has 'been less concerned . . . to supply a lot of biographical detail than to tell the story of how a life that contained much pain and suffering was redeemed by enduring achievements in literature and in painting' (p. viii), an aim that he largely fulfils. Greatly admiring *In Parenthesis* (1937) and *The Anathemata* (1952), he has been especially interested in exploring their bases in the poet's experiences and interests.

Commendable in any biography, but especially apt in one of an artist who had an acute sense of *genius loci*, physical locations, especially Jones's homes and those of the close friends whom he visited, are precisely identified and described (as they were then and are now), and their circumstances, atmosphere and possible influence upon Jones are considered. It is obvious that Alldritt has not only taken the trouble to visit these places but has also closely examined and reflected upon them. Another welcome characteristic of this work is that Alldritt accurately and efficiently explains the background, roles and relationships of the numerous people in Jones's life (such as Harman Grisewood, Jim Ede, Prudence Pelham, Helen Sutherland, René Hague, the Gills, and members of his own family), as well as the climate in which his work was created and published, benefiting any reader who is unfamiliar with the cultural *milieu* of early 20th-century Britain.

There are a few errors and these are minor, all of them showing the author's unfamiliarity with Catholicism. For instance, he refers to 'the Catholic sacrament of the Mass' (p. 46), and gives the title of *Introduction to the Devout Life* by St Francis de Sales as '*An Introduction to the Devout*' (p. 34). I would have appreciated more attention given to Jones's spirituality, especially how it informed his sense of vocation as a writer and artist. His 50 years as a Dominican tertiary must have influenced his life and his attitudes, yet this is not assessed here.

Occasionally Alldritt is needlessly vague, as when the 'well-known nineteenth-century architect' who designed the monastery of Capel-y-ffin, Charles Buckeridge, is unnamed (p. 57). More often, one feels a scarcity of those details which assist the reader's imagination and understanding, such as what the typical daily regime was like in that remote mountain community. Alldritt also seems to have overlooked the importance for Jones, as an artist, of his visits to the Benedictine abbey on Caldey; for, many years later, he asserted that 'It was in the Vale of Ewyas and on Caldey Island that I began to have some idea of what I personally would ask a painting to be, and I think from 1926 onwards there has been a fairly recognisable direction in my work' (David Jones, 'Life for H.S.Ede', quoted in Jonathan Miles, *Eric Gill & David Jones at Capel-y-ffin*, 1992 p. 49). Instead, Alldritt only describes the devastating effect upon Jones of Petra Gill breaking off their long engagement to be married, of which he was informed while on the island.

Considering Jones's paintings, Alldritt prudently stays close to the interpretations of Jonathan Miles and Derek Shiel, the leading authorities in this area. Being

primarily a literary scholar (whose previous work includes studies of Yeats, Orwell, Eliot and Lawrence, as well as a biography of Basil Bunting), he is much more comfortable when discussing Jones's writings and feels confident about interpreting and evaluating these independently of other scholars. His appraisal of *The Anathemata* is particularly astute.

We may expect that Thomas Dilworth's long-awaited biography of David Jones will be longer, more detailed and more analytical than this book: but Keith Alldritt must be congratulated for providing the first such work, one that is generally accurate, is both affectionate and respectful towards its subject, and is also clearly and fluently written. *David Jones: Writer and Artist* will be interesting and useful for Jonesian scholars, but I hope it will be read much more widely than that as an accessible and reliable account of Jones's life.

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