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# Formed by faith and the First World War

*The artist and writer David Jones has been largely forgotten in recent years but a new exhibition and book have brought a renewed interest, says* **PATRICK MARNHAM**

**DAVID** Jones was an artist and poet whose life was destroyed, and then strangely recreated, by the Great War. T S Eliot described *In Parenthesis*, Jones's epic poem about the trenches, as 'a work of genius'; others have seen it as by far the greatest poem ever written about that war. His 'writings', as he called them, were loved by Auden and Dylan Thomas. His art was admired by Henry Moore, Ben Nicholson and Kenneth Clark among many others, but today he has sunk into relative obscurity. The last retrospective was at the Tate in 1981, and there was a centenary exhibition at the National Museum of Wales twenty years ago. Now the publication of *The Art of David Jones: Vision and Memory* by Ariane Bankes and Paul Hills, and exhibitions at the Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, and the Ditchling Museum of Art and Craft in East Sussex bring him back to a long overdue prominence.

David Jones, born in 1895 and brought up in the London suburb of Brockley, entered the Camberwell School of Art at the age of fourteen. When he started he was the only student in short trousers and considered to be too young to attend the life classes. Jones was English by upbringing and half-English by birth, but he always thought of himself as Welsh. He was a romantic child, fascinated by Celtic legends, but he was also patriotic and when war was declared in August 1914 he immediately tried to enlist. He was rejected by the Artists Rifles as his chest was undersized. He eventually joined up in January 1915 at the age of nineteen in the Royal Welch Fusiliers, the regiment in which Siegfried Sassoon and Robert Graves were both to be officers. His chest measurement had not changed but the Army's minimum requirement had been lowered due to the pressing need for more troops.

There is a photograph in the first



David Jones in his greatcoat

room of the exhibition at the Pallant House Gallery of the young recruit in his new uniform before he is sent to France for the first time. It shows a boy with a kind, gentle, rather humorous expression looking as though he might be ready to set out on a grocery round or kick a ball about with a younger brother. His greatcoat seems at least one size too big for him. Jones remained a private soldier throughout the war; an attempt to persuade him to apply for a commission petered out when the staff officer asked him which school he had attended. He was wounded in close combat in the Battle of the Somme and in the following year fought at Passchendaele. In January 1918 he nearly died from trench fever and was invalided home, having been in action or under fire for most of the previous three years. A second photograph, taken in 1919, just before he was discharged, shows him in the same uniform but leaning on a stick. He has a crumpled, wary look and seems lost in thought; his gaze is fixed some way

beyond the photographer, as though he is expecting something rather unpleasant to jump out at any moment. In the years that followed the war he suffered two catastrophic nervous breakdowns, probably due to untreated shell shock.

On being discharged Jones re-enrolled at art school and then in 1921 he converted to Catholicism. He had first been drawn to Catholicism somewhere south of Armentières when talking to a Catholic chaplain – a whisky-drinking Jesuit who had won the MC. In the same year, 1921, Jones met Eric Gill, one of the great influences on his work. When Gill moved to Capel-y-ffin on the southern Welsh border to set up a religious artistic community, Jones followed him. The landscape of the Black Mountains, with its herds of wild ponies and bitter weather, became an inspiration. The hill in the background of 'Capel-y-ffin' (1926), is the Tump (known by irreverent locals as 'Lord Hereford's Knob') and was a favourite subject.

David Jones fell in love with Gill's daughter, Petra, and they became engaged in 1924, an event he celebrated with an oil painting 'A Garden Enclosed', taking the title from the Douai (Roman Catholic) version of the 'Song of Songs' – 'My sister, my spouse is a garden enclosed, a garden enclosed, a fountain sealed up'. Petra, who had accepted a role as Jones's muse, broke off the engagement three years later and married a fellow disciple of Gill's. Jones was heartbroken. The voluptuous portrait he made of her in 1931, 'Petra im Rosenhag', is intimate but also respectful, almost reverent. What one often notices in photographs of the artist are his eyes, like owls' eyes, dark and enormous, drinking in the smallest detail. The Pallant House show contains some of the drawings Jones made during the war. He became fascinated by the patterns the

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Above: 'Flora in Calix Light', 1950; left: 'The Garden Enclosed', 1924; below: 'Petra im Rosenhag', 1931



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trenches made on the ground, which were a welcome distraction. The great portrait of Petra displays the same obsession with distracting visual detail, as well as the extraordinary speed of development in his confidence and technique. That same masterly detail is evident in other watercolours such as 'The Artist's Worktable' (1929) or 'Laetare Sunday, Thrush' (1948).

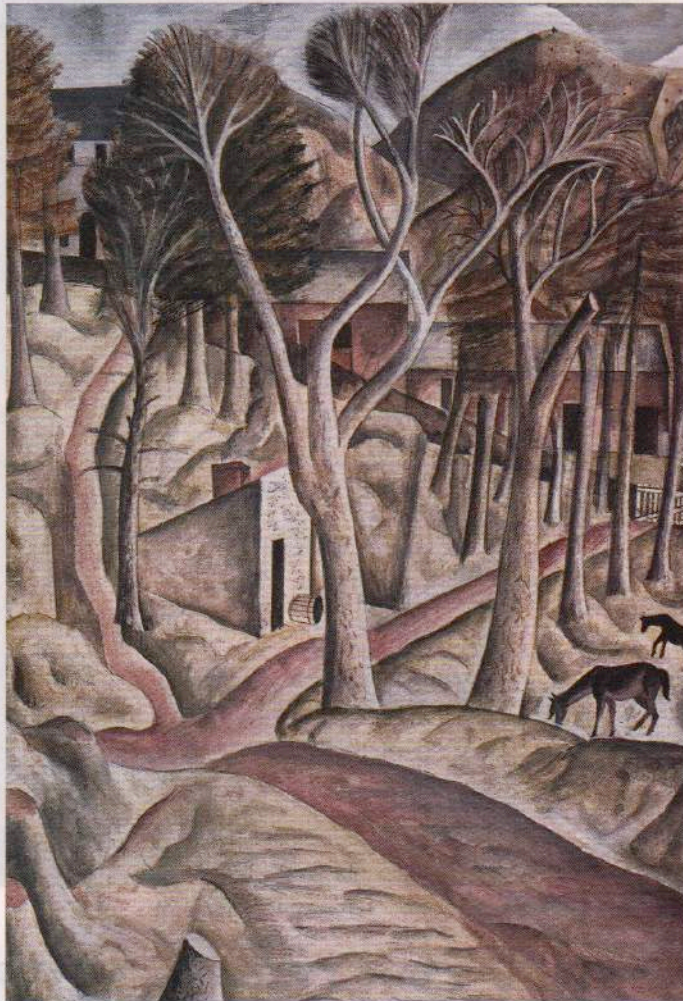
The importance of religious imagery and references in Jones's art is impossible to overlook. He said that he chose the title of *In Parenthesis* because, 'for us amateur soldiers ... the war itself was a parenthesis ... and also because our curious type of existence here is altogether in parenthesis'. As time passed the strength of Jones's faith burned stronger in his art. But even landscapes such as 'Capel-y-ffin' or 'Lourdes' (1928) are far more than an assembly of patterns and colours. They are invested with a spiritual vision – in his painting he has made

**Memories of war became his creative demon; he exorcised them in his art**

them into magical places, and powerful springs of belief.

In later years David Jones often spoke of the War. He agreed with Sassoon that it was something he could never get out of his system, however hard he tried. He once said 'I'm not sure I killed anyone, though I ought to have done'. Memories of war became his creative demon; he exorcised them in his art and wrestled with them in his writing.

*The Art of David Jones: Vision and Memory* is a sumptuous introduction to the subject as well as providing a very thorough account of the artist's life. There is much more in both the book and in the Pallant House exhibition than mentioned here. There are his woodcuts and the drawings of animals (also at Ditchley), and there are the wonderful 'chalice' still lifes; 'Flora in Calix Light' (1950) is a limpid study of watery air, glass and light that traces the altar furniture of the Mass. And there are the late painted inscriptions of texts in Latin and English, 'the word as image' that may have been prompted by the opening words of St John's Gospel, 'In the beginning was the Word, and Word was with God and the Word was God...', the words that ended every Mass that Jones ever attended. It is these painted inscriptions that Ariane Bankes considers to be his finest work.



Above: 'Capel-y-ffin', 1926-7; left: 'The Dove', 1927

Anyone intending to immerse themselves in *In Parenthesis* would do well to read an invaluable guide and introduction by Thomas Dilworth, *David Jones in the Great War*, first. 📖

• 'David Jones: Vision and Memory' is at the Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, until 21st February 2016. 'The Animals of David Jones' is at the Ditchling Museum of Art and Craft, Ditchling, until 6th March 2016. 'The Art of David Jones: Vision and Memory' by Ariane Bankes and Paul Hills, Lund Humphries £40.

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