

Meeting King Lud at the Fleet Gate: David Jones and the Welshness of London

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Throughout his career the modernist writer and painter David Jones explored the idea that Celtic Britain should be read in the context of its Roman heritage. Through the transforming experience of Roman occupation and through the following centuries of allegiance to the Church of Rome, Jones argued that the Welsh were what he called ‘the heirs of Romanity’ whose history and culture reached back to European and classical roots which remained more significant than the effects of the English interregnum. This fascination with Rome also affected his reading of London, the city where he spent nearly the whole of his life, and where the Roman presence was still visible in walls and streets and placenames. Many of these concerns come together in his long poem *The Anathémata* (1952), particularly in the central sections about the maritime tradition of the city of London. In this essay I will be looking in particular at Sections V and VII, ‘The Lady of the Pool’ and ‘Mabinog’s Liturgy’, in which sub-Roman elements are interwoven with motifs from medieval Welsh tales, particularly those concerning King Lud at the White Mount.¹

Jones’s use of medieval Welsh literature and history are part of a deliberate strategy to realign an English-speaking audience with a view of history in which there is no Welsh identity, even in London, which is not based on the culture and tradition of Welsh Wales. By interweaving this material into a poem about the history and nature of Roman and post-Roman London, and by using motifs from Welsh tradition about the city of London as the capital of the Island of Britain, Jones implies for the surviving Celticity of Wales a Livian grandeur which had been denied by centuries of English colonisation.

From the earliest critical writing about the work of David Jones there has been a sense of dismay that his written work is not more highly regarded in modernist studies.² More recently, Robert Yates has written about what he describes as ‘the continued obscurity of David Jones in the English canon’.³ Speaking of Jones’s Great War epic *In Parenthesis* (1937), Yates argues that the canon of Great War poetry has been established by anthology (there have been almost 150 different collections to date), that the poets included are overwhelmingly ‘English’, and that David Jones is therefore one of the writers who barely gets a mention amongst what George Walter has elsewhere called ‘[...] the bite-sized snippets that somehow told

- 1 Quotations are taken from the 1972 Faber edition, the text of which is based on the revised, second edition of 1955.
- 2 See, for example, David Blamires, *David Jones: Artist and Writer* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1971) and Neil Corcoran, *The Song of Deeds: a Study of The Anathémata of David Jones* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1982).
- 3 See Robert J. Yates, ‘From Mametz Wood to Ditchling Common’, *New Welsh Review*, 68 (2005), 29–38.

the “truth” about the war in an easily digestible form.⁴ Jones is not alone, of course, in being highly regarded by some readers and critics without being part of the canonical mainstream of literary modernism, and with the centenary of the Great War a number of other ‘forgotten’ or undervalued writers are being re-evaluated.⁵ The suspicion remains, however, that something more interesting is happening in the case of David Jones, and that it has to do with his challenge to the semiotic orthodoxy of literary modernism. What Jones is doing in most of his writing from 1937 onwards is what might now be called an act of subversion, although the term was not then current in literary discourse. He methodically removes the assumed cultural foundations of modernist writing in England and replaces it with something which is quite unsettling to the hegemonic position exemplified by Pound, Eliot, and Auden. It is this more than anything, more than the difficulty of the work, more even than the historical anti-Catholicism of the English canon, that keeps his work on the margins of English literary study. More interestingly, this is the same strategy which has also made him a problematical figure in Wales.

The Anathémata was published by Faber in 1952 and is one of the unacknowledged milestones in the development of Welsh writing in English. It was famously praised by Auden as being ‘very probably the finest long poem written in English this century’, and ten years after it was first published Auden responded to the apparent difficulty of the work by declaring that the time and trouble he had taken with it had been ‘infinitely rewarding’.⁶ Despite this level of critical acclaim the poem has never quite established itself in the modernist canon alongside other long, difficult works such as the *Cantos* of Ezra Pound. Like Pound and Eliot before him, David Jones makes much use in his poem of non-English words and phrases, but where canonical writers use classical, Germanic, and Romance sources, David Jones uses Welsh and Latin. He does this in order to create a text which visually and orally makes it apparent to the reader that culture is a multilingual inheritance and that the connotation of artefact and placename is pluralist in nature. In the ‘Preface’ to *The Anathémata* he writes, ‘I intend what I have written to be said’ – that is, to be read aloud. And later he adds, ‘You can’t get the intended meaning unless you hear the sound and you can’t get the sound unless you observe the score’ (p. 35).

The Anathémata is also a poem which was written to be published with footnotes and an explanatory preface, unlike some other modernist works, such as Ezra Pound’s *Cantos*, which rhetorically challenge the reader to identify all of the dense allusions without any help from the author. In his ‘Preface’, Jones begins by imitating the introduction to the *Historia Brittonum*, and disingenuously claiming that he has simply made a heap of all that he could find. But he is making the serious point that an English writer of Welsh origins living in London would, if he stumbled onto a heap of his own literary and historical inheritance, find just the

4 See the ‘Introduction’ to George Walter (ed.), *The Penguin Book of First World War Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2006).

5 See, for example, Patrick McGuinness, ‘From Mud and Cinders: T. E. Hulme, “A Certain Kind of Tory” at War’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 19 November 2014, pp. 14–15.

6 Auden’s assessment is quoted in the blurb of the 1972 Faber edition. For his review of the American Chilmark Press edition, see ‘Adam as a Welshman’, *New York Review of Books*, 1 February 1963.

would seem that an impoverishment of some sort would have to be admitted. (p. 23)

He extends the argument to encompass not just lexical items but what he calls 'signs':

If the painter makes visual forms, the content of which is chairs or chair-ishness, what are the chances that those who regard [these] painting[s] will run to meet [them] with the notions 'seat' 'throne' 'session' '*cathedra*' 'Scone' 'on-the-right-hand-of-the-Father' in mind? (p. 24)

The function of the artist, he argues, is to hold up what he calls 'valid signs'. But the argument about connotation remains valid. As Jones himself observes: 'When is a door not a door? When is a sign not a sign?' (p. 25)

Jones is arguing that some signs which are valid but no longer part of the common currency need to be held up, and need to have attention drawn to them, if necessary, by the arc lights of the scholarly footnote, which he explicitly defends as a necessity in a work like *The Anathémata*. Indeed, nearly all his published works contain annotation of an explanatory or scholarly nature, not just because he was addicted to the morphia of annotation but because of the nature of the texts he wrote and the audiences which he imagined them addressing. So in his explanation of this in the 'Preface', Jones deliberately links names which are generally known for readers of English modernist texts with other, lesser-known names from Wales: Flora with Blodeuwedd; Laverna with Rhiannon; Dux Britanniarum with Ymherawdr. Jones weaves terms such as *caeawc* (which he uses to mean 'an ornamental fastening') and *hudlath* ('magic wand') and *traeth* ('beach' or 'strand') into a picture which is framed by the imperial purple of Roman London so that the reader cannot see the one without the other. In the familiar terms of English modernism he explains this macaronic procedure in terms of the Western church:

When in the Good Friday Office, the Latin, without any warning, is suddenly pierced by the Greek cry *Agios o Theos*, the Greek-speaking Roman Church of the third century becomes almost visibly present to us. (p. 13)

In other words, nobody can hear or read this service while pretending that the Greek language and tradition was not an integral part of the Roman world and the Roman church. Analogous arguments, of course, were behind many of the objections by Catholics, including David Jones and Saunders Lewis, to the vernacular reforms of Vatican II, but the major effect for readers of *The Anathémata*, I would suggest, and for other works such as *In Parenthesis* and *The Sleeping Lord*, relates to a different set of overlapping languages and cultures.⁸ To paraphrase Jones himself:

8 David Jones, *In Parenthesis* (London: Faber, 1937); *The Sleeping Lord* (London: Faber, 1974).

when the connotative world of twentieth-century English modernism is, without any warning, suddenly pierced by the Welsh cry *Gwledig Nef* ('Lord of Heaven'), the Welsh-speaking world of pre-Tudor Britain becomes almost visibly present to us.

This is the effect which Jones is trying to create. The function of texts like *The Anathémata* is to make it impossible for an English literary readership to pretend that Brythonic language and tradition was not a pre-existing and integral part of the Germanic world which emerged from post-Roman Britain. In *The Anathémata*, however, Jones takes this strategy, which he had already used successfully in *In Parenthesis*, to an altogether more challenging position. It is a standard position of imperial interest in colonial otherness that it finds delight in a distantly exotic culture which can never impinge on the imperial centre. The 'Celtic fringe' in Wales and Ireland might be qualitatively different, but that difference resided somewhere else. But what about the sacred heartland of Englishness? What if that ineradicable core of Welsh or Brythonic connotative experience were also located in the inner sanctum of imperial English identity which David Jones figures on the dust wrapper of *The Anathémata* as 'Londinium'? That question is partly what *The Anathémata* is attempting to answer, by arguing that you cannot properly 'read' the city of London if English is your only cultural context. 'What should they know of England, who only England know?', as Kipling famously puts it in his poem 'The English Flag'.⁹

London was the site of the first large Welsh diaspora community in the post-medieval world, with significant numbers of Welsh people working in the city and the court after 1485. The chronicle of Elis Gruffydd (1490–c. 1552), the self-styled soldier of Calais, contains many references to Welsh people working in London in the 1520s and 1530s.¹⁰ And earlier still, in the work of the *cywyddwyr* of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, there are references to commodity goods such as pomegranates and fine boxes, and to exotic spices like cumin, most of which would have come from London. In the work of the later *cywyddwyr* there are also references to Cheapside itself, the centre of commodity trade, which occurs as *siep-seid* in the work of Tudur Aled and Guto'r Glyn.¹¹ During the sixteenth century, the movement of Welsh people to London grew along with the city itself. Between 1541 and 1582 the population of London doubled, from less than 50,000 to about 112,000, and by 1600 it reached 200,000. The idea that London was the metropolis of England was current from at least the thirteenth century, originally in the conceit of St Paul's as the centre of London as a metropolitan see. By the fourteenth century London is an exemplar of town life and in the anonymous middle English poem

9 See 'The English Flag' in *Rudyard Kipling: Selected Poetry*, ed. by Craig Raine (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 95.

10 On the content and significance of the chronicle, see T. Jones, 'A Welsh Chronicler in Tudor England', *Welsh History Review*, I (1960–63), 1–17; J. Hunter, 'Taliesin at the Court of Henry VIII: Aspects of the Writings of Elis Gruffydd', *THSC*, 10 (2004), 41–56. For a survey of the Welsh in Tudor London, see Emrys Jones (ed.), *The Welsh in London: 1500–2000* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001).

11 For examples, see Helen Fulton, 'Trading Places: Representations of Urban Culture in Medieval Welsh Poetry', *Studia Celtica*, 31 (1997), 219–30.

called *St Erkenwald* of about 1370, London is explicitly called ‘the metropolis and the master town’ (l. 25).

There is also a sense that in the early modern period London was in some sense the metropolis of Wales and that the continuing use, in Welsh writing, of images of London as the capital of a Brythonic Island of the Mighty is in one sense nothing more than the metropolitan yearnings of a nation emerging into the new world of commodity trading and city states. This was an idea which perhaps only retreated completely with the creation of Cardiff as the capital of Wales, though by then it had become almost unthinkable for many Welsh writers that such a relationship had once existed, as the imperative of self-determination necessarily elided parts of the historical relationship with England. But David Jones, characteristically ahead of his time, is not taken in by the short-term pragmatism of three or four hundred years.

Section V of *The Anathémata*, which is called ‘The Lady of the Pool’, opens with a rhetorical question which locates London in a Brythonic context:

Did he meet Lud at the Fleet Gate? did he count the top-
trees in the anchored forest of Llefelys
under the White Mount? (p. 124)

The footnotes point us to the medieval Welsh tale *Cyfranc Lludd a Llefelys* and ‘the assembling of vessels in the Pool of London’ whose presiding spirit names the section. The note also reminds us that ‘The White Mount = The Tower in Welsh tales’. The poem establishes the context of the Tower as being as much concerned with the burial of Bran’s head as with the internship of English monarchs, and other elements from Welsh history and literature are piled into the poem alongside the Roman and medieval topography of the city with references to the medieval Welsh tales of *Macsén Wledig* and *Culhwch ac Olwen* cropping up between the Roman wall and Marian churches of the medieval city:

From the Two Sticks an’ a’ Apple to Bride o’
the Shandies’ Well over the Fleet; from Hallows-on-Wall to
the keel-haws; from the ditch without the Vicinal Gate to
Lud’s hill; within and extra the fending circuit, both banks
the wide and demarking middle-brook that waters, from the
midst of the street of it, our twin-hilled Urbs. At Martin
miles in the Pomarary (where the Roman pippins grow) at
winged Marmor *miles*, gilt-lorica’d on his wheat-hill, stick-
ing the Laidly Worm as threats to coil us all.

At the Lady-at-Hill
above Romeland’s wharf-lanes
at the Great Mother’s newer *chappelle*
at New Heva’s Old Crepel [...] (p. 127)

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This is one of the sections where the annotation is longer than the poem itself, and the notes for these lines identify the churches in the survey. These include St Mary, Whitechapel, St Bride's, Fleet Street, All Hallows and then a little later St Mary at Hill, Billingsgate, Mary le Bow, St Mary Woolnoth, Langbourn, St Mary Staining, Cripplegate, and St Mary Pellipar, Lime Street, in the heart of the skin-dressing and furrier trade, as the name implies (*pellio*, a furrier), and which Jones tells us (relying on Stow's *Survey of London* of 1598) is properly called St Mary, St Ursula, and the Eleven Thousand Virgins. Most of this section is spoken by a Cockney lavender seller, who tells her tales to the captain who has returned to the Pool of London after the voyage which has lasted for most of the previous three sections of the poem. The setting for this section is the fifteenth century and it is late summer. Lavender is being sold on the streets and the churches listed by her are all preparing for the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross on 14 September. She performs various identities as she tells her stories, including those told to her by a Welsh mariner. This Welsh wonder voyager had many tales to tell, but the lavender seller remains largely unimpressed:

But, to put the cap on all:
that his Maddoxes, Owenses, Griffins and Company was a
type of sea-king and very lords of admorality [...]

[...] he swore by the Tree of Chester
by a certain Jessy Mowers and by the owls, with many
darroes an' dammoes, Dukes and Jews and b' their god's
great athlete, Samson, and by Cassandra, as I take to be Welsh
for Delilah [...]

[...] By Tylows and Bynows unvouched of the Curia, by fitz
Nut the Welsh fairy, by the holy pillar of a Lacy or a
Lizzy or some such, by the rigmaroled wonders of a most
phenomenal beast called the Troit or such like, by a' elf-
sheen woman contrived of sweet posies, by Arthur Duke of
the Britains, his three Gaynores and his Pernel's besides, by
Gildas the Wise and by Wild Merlin, by the marvel thorn of
Orcop and by the four fay-fetched flowers that be said to
blow where ever a' Olwen walks in Wales
by the four Gospel true-tellers
and by the 'broidered tales
of Geoffrey, bishop of Asaph's
now deemed the most incontinent liar on record [...] (pp. 150–52)

This last section is another of the densely annotated sections, with more footnote than text and explanatory references, among others, to Sant Teilo, Sant Beuno, Edern fab Nudd, Eliseg, Twrch Trwyth, Blodeuwedd, Gwenhwyfar, the Welsh Triads, Geoffrey of Monmouth, and *Culhwch ac Olwen*. The extended historical

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continuous link between Roman occupation and contemporary life. There were Brythonic Celts in London when the Romans were building the Wall, and there are Welsh people there now, still speaking a version of the same Celtic language, and sharing a literature and a history which is alive with historical connotations, however marginalized it has been by centuries of imperial control and by various Acts of Union and of prohibition. In a letter to Saunders Lewis written a few years before his death, Jones writes that:

Even at the lowest level of mere debate it was possible to say to the anglicizers 'we emerged from within the Roman imperium & are the only people left in this island who did. In fact our native princes sprang from a line of Latin officials, &, in contrast to Gaul the Brittonic speech continued side by side of Latin throughout the 4 centuries of Roman occupation,— we are the heirs of romanity.'¹³

What then is the significance of David Jones and *The Anathémata* for Welsh writing in English? I believe that Jones's work was ahead of its time in the idea of Welshness which he constructs. From the 1930s onwards, Jones was creating texts which argued that artists could not fully participate in the English-language culture of Wales if they remained ignorant of Welsh-language history and culture. As early as 1937, in his Great War epic *In Parenthesis*, he was formulating the view that Welshness in English was predicated, even for monolingual English speakers, on Welsh-language culture. There were Welsh-speaking writers, of course, who wrote in English at that time and who privately took for granted the value of Welsh-language culture, but Jones is one of the first to write in English from inside the Welsh tradition. It is all the more remarkable that he was doing this before 1937, and before his first meeting with Saunders Lewis, whose friendship would refine and enrich Jones's understanding of Welsh history and culture. Jones's work would seem less remarkable if it were written in twenty-first century Wales, but in the mid-twentieth century, his symbolic use of London to create a multilingual paradigm of Welshness was a tiny bloom that can easily be overlooked in the 'first flowering' of industrial Anglo-Welsh writing.

13 The letter from David Jones is dated 'Hydref 12 (dydd Llun) 1971' [12 October 1971]. Both letters are part of the David Jones Collection at the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.