

Jonah Jones: An Artist's Life

Peter Jones

Bridgend: Seren, 2011

ISBN 978 1854115560, 279pp, h/b, £15

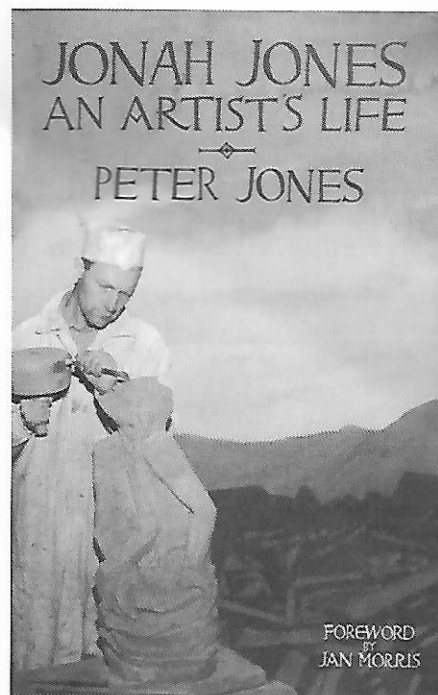
It was William Blake who spoke of 'conversing with Eternal Realities as they Exist in the Human Imagination', and James Joyce, in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, who, in his character Stephen Dedalus, defined beauty in terms of integrity, consonance and clarity – all in themselves attributes of the Divine. When, in the Introduction to this biography Jan Morris speaks of Jonah as an artist who 'did not seem to recognize distinctions', an artist equally at home as sculptor, author, painter, stone-letterer and calligrapher, 'an artist, believing in the unity of art', that unity in diversity is best understood in terms of Blake and Joyce's definitions. He was an artist with an intense inner life, and that, as is so often the case, rather set him apart from others. Jan Morris recalls Jones as 'alone in my mind when I conjure his presence now, in his white working overalls beside a half-completed sculpture, silently thinking about it, chisel in hand ... I realize that he is not alone really, is never alone, but has noble and loving colleagues beside him, beyond my sight'. This is an illustration of the spiritual life of the artist, never disconnected from the created and material world (unlike amorphous 'spirituality'), and closely related to what Patriarch Bartholomew of Constantinople has called *kallos*, the response to the sense of call. 'Beauty is a call, beyond the here and now, to the original principle and purpose of the world'. As an artist believing in the unity of art, Jonah Jones sought to respond to the call of beauty, and to express it, so that others might encounter it, relate to it, and respond to it, in their turn.

Peter Jones' biography of his father succeeds in putting us in touch with the man, from his birth in 1919 and childhood in County Durham, until his death in Cardiff in 2004. Jonah was not his name – that was really Leonard –

but as Peter points out, so many Joneses in military service are nicknamed 'Jonah', and that name stuck, and was adopted. Neither can he really be identified as Welsh, though probably, as mining was in the family blood, no doubt an antecedent Jones had originated there. Certainly Jonah himself, who lived and worked in Wales for so many years, and drew such inspiration from its landscape, adopted it as his homeland, and was in his turn (though never entirely) adopted by it. He was always something of a nonconformist, something, as he said himself, of a loner. He did not become a miner, but a librarian. When war broke out in 1939, he was a non-combatant, his service being with the RAMC. He met, and subsequently married, a Jewish ATS girl in Palestine. Not until 1947 were they able to settle in north Wales, and for Jonah to begin to realize his long felt ambition to work as an artist. Peter Jones very well brings out the struggles of the early years, and the slow recognition of his talents and abilities. Jonah Jones was 40 before it can really be said that he was 'established'. Not the least value in this biography is the comprehensive list of Jonah's works, so many of which date from the 1970s and 1980s.

Peter brings out his father's uneasy relationship with the 'Art Establishment'. He was passionate about art education, and devoted much time and energy to it, including four, very often frustrating, years at the National College of Art and Design in Dublin. He came to despair of committees, and of the hubris, insularity and self-serving smugness sometimes illustrated by their members.

He had, always, as compensation, his work, his family and his friends. For a loner, he had a gift for friendship, with Clough Williams-Ellis and Huw Wheldon among countless others. Although frequently commissioned, and sometimes as a result all but overwhelmed, his work was not, and still is not, always appreciated. Peter's list of work that has been destroyed, such as the *Hedd Dros Wynedd* sculpture for the Colwyn Bay Police Headquarters, or *Bethel* in Margam Park, makes depress-



ing reading. Even today work is under threat. His 1967-68 wall mosaic and *dalle de verre* windows in the Catholic church of the Resurrection at Morfa Nevyon are at risk, the church being now deemed 'surplus to requirements', and other works are housed in less than satisfactory conditions, and largely inaccessible, on the campus of the University of Wales Trinity St David, in Lampeter.

Jonah Jones is perhaps today an 'unfashionable' artist. A short review of a single book can do little to correct that. However, Peter Jones has given us an insightful, honest and often moving insight into the life of his father. Catholic by conversion, but 'lapsed agnostic' by nature, he nevertheless, in his heart of hearts, if Peter and his father's own words are to be believed, understood that everyone is part of the encounter with God, and everything assumes mystical or sacramental value. Certainly so much of his work reveals that understanding.

John Morgan-Guy is Acting Chaplain at the University of Wales Trinity St David, Lampeter

Please remember ACE in your will

By supporting ACE through a legacy you will make a much valued contribution to this organisation and you may also be able to protect the gifts you wish to give to your family and friends.

Please contact the ACE office if you require a form of wording to assist you in your discussions with a lawyer.