

The James Jones Literary Society Newsletter

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Society's Growth Means New Challenges Ahead

The transition from the old year to the new traditionally is a time for taking stock. Because reflecting on our past performance and future goals seems as appropriate for organizations as for individuals, this presidential message summarizes the Society's major accomplishments since its founding in November 1991 and highlights the exciting challenges that await us in the second half of the decade. We could not have come so far so fast without your support, and your continued cooperation will be essential if we are to sustain our progressive pace in the coming year.

Although our name has changed to the James Jones Literary Society--the better to identify our focus--our basic purposes remain constant. We exist, first, to encourage interest in and study of Jones' life and literary legacy and, second, to facilitate the work of promising new and unpublished fiction writers.

To address the first goal, we hold a symposium each fall featuring lectures, panels, media presentations and displays that stimulate consideration of Jones' contribution to American letters. The fifth annual symposium, successfully concluded in Robinson in October, offered an unusually rich bill of fare. Centered on the beginning and the ending of World War II, it featured discussions by Professors George Garrett of Virginia and Tony Williams of SIU-Carbondale about From Here to Eternity's inception and reception as fiction and film. The audience further enjoyed a video of

the dedication on Makapuu Point of a bronze plaque honoring Jones, which was installed through the efforts of Jon Shirota during last spring's Society trip to Hawaii. Tribute also was paid to those who served and died in the war during a special ceremony in the Lincoln Trail College (LTC) Triangle, complete with a flyover, military salute and the playing of Taps.

At the annual meeting held in conjunction with the symposium, consensus emerged that while the Society's roots remain in Robinson, with its headquarters at LTC, the symposium should move periodically to other sites associated with Jones in order to attract new audiences and new members as well as to distribute more equitably the burden of hosting this event. The 1996 symposium will be held at the University of Illinois-Springfield, where the documentary James Jones: From Reveille to Taps was produced and where the Handy Writers' Colony archive entices scholars to revisit the formative stages of Jones' career. The symposium is scheduled for Saturday, November 2, 1996, with an associated workshop for aspiring authors planned for the previous day and conducted in part by Kaylie Jones, a creative writing teacher and published novelist. A program committee will consider possible sites for future symposia, but the Society is committed to meet in Robinson at least every three years.

Another way to spread interest in Jones is through our newsletter and other outreach efforts. Co-editors Ray Elliott and Vanessa Faurie, who was elected as the Board's 21st member, will begin publishing the newsletter four rather than two times a year in 1996. Mike Lennon is coordinating a series of essays on Jones' fiction for successive issues. We hope you will enjoy them all.

A brochure describing the Society's history, purposes and activities is also being prepared for distribution in early 1996. If you know prospective members or donors who should receive one, please contact vice president and secretary Helen Howe for a copy.

Finally, several Society members publicized Jones' Illinois roots at the state history symposium. James Giles commented on papers by Tom Wood, Greg Randle and Marlene Emmons at a panel session December 1 at the Renaissance Hotel in Springfield.

The Society's second goal--assisting aspiring writers in the generous spirit which supported Jones' literary beginnings and which he later extended to other neophytes--is also being addressed. The \$2,500 First Novel Fellowship Award program, now entering its fourth year, is already well established and contributing to the Society's--and Jones'--national visibility. Nancy Flynn, the 1993 winner, is reportedly nearing completion of her novel. The Frequency of Souls by Mary Kay Zuravleff, our 1994 winner, will be published next spring and reviewed in the newsletter. Thanks to a

generous gift, two equally promising winners were recognized in 1995: Rick Bass and Tanuja Desai. A full-page ad announcing their awards will appear in January's Paris Review, compliments of George Plimpton, honorary Society member. This past year also saw the presentation of the first Creative Writing Scholarship for a past, present or future LTC student. Jason Pargin, currently enrolled at SIU- C, accepted the \$500 prize for two of his short stories.

Although we can take pride in this record of achievement after only four short years, we cannot afford to rest on our laurels. Through strategic planning we have identified other important areas for attention. These include assistance with cataloguing the Jones archive at the University of Texas, supporting the reprinting of his books, preparing materials to facilitate teaching his work, encouraging the restoration of Jones sites in Robinson and establishing a Society home page on the World Wide Web. However, to pursue this ambitious agenda, we need two things: more members and more money. We hope you can help us attract both.

To add new members, let's follow the time-honored practice of "each one reach one." If each of our more than 250 current members got just one friend to join, the Society's rolls would double and its cash flow for daily operations would improve.

At the annual meeting we also agreed on the need to establish a permanent endowment. These funds would be invested so that the interest could be used to support special one-time or long-term projects like those mentioned earlier. The Society is pleased to announce that an anonymous donor will match the first \$25,000 raised for this endowment. Therefore, if you can make a charitable contribution for tax purposes in 1995, or if you can include the Society in your plans for giving in 1996, you'll have the satisfaction of knowing that your donation will do double the good, thanks to this generous matching offer. Please contact treasurer Juanita Martin at LTC for details. And remember--'tis the season when it is more blessed to give than to receive!

-- Judith Everson, President

Beware of Greeks

In the autumn of 1972, National Review's founder and then-editor-in-chief thought it a good idea to turn me into an intellectual and let me loose among the expatriate literati of the City of Light. I had reported for NR from Hue that spring, and had assured our readers that the little men in black pyjamas had been thoroughly beaten once and for all. What I hadn't figured on was Watergate, and the way those nice guys who destroyed Richard Nixon's Presidency would manage to get two birds with one stone.

South Vietnam went down when the Commies realized the American cavalry was not about to come to its rescue.

In October of that year, however, things still looked good. Nixon was about to be re-elected in every state but the one that keeps sending Ted Kennedy to drink in Washington. And I was in Paris playing Papa Hemingway. Bill Buckley's idea was for me to interview American writers like Irwin Shaw, James Jones, and Janet Flanner, all three living in Paris. I was excited at the idea and for once went to work immediately.

In fact, I rang James Jones, the author of *From Here To Eternity*, *Some Came Running*, and *Thin Red Line*, from the bar of the Plaza-Athenee, where I was living in great comfort after my al fresco stay in Hue. He answered the phone himself, and the conversation went something like this:

Me: "Hello, Mr. Jones, my name is Taki Theodoracopulos and I write for National Review and would like very much to interview you."

JJ: "I am sorry, but I do not give interviews. Sorry."

Me: "This is very bad news because I am a struggling writer who just returned from Vietnam and need to feed two children and a wife."

JJ: "Well, we're all struggling writers, what can I say?"

Me: "Some more so than others." JJ: "What did you say your name was and who do you write for?"

Me: "Taki Theodoracopulos, and it's National Review, the William Buckley fortnightly."

JJ: "You poor guy. You better come around."

And around I went, to his beautiful house in the Left Bank, where he and his wife, Gloria, treated me with great kindness and generosity of spirit. Jones, in fact, revealed to me that Paris was over for him, that he was returning to his roots, and--repeating a Hemingway theory--that Paris was for the young and had been irreparably damaged by the modern architecture that was sprouting all over the city. "If I want modern I'll get it at the source, my own country," was the way he put it. A butler served us a wonderful lunch, and then we talked about writing. Time magazine had just published some rubbish--Henry Luce had been dead five years, and the rot had set in almost immediately--about how Jones and Shaw were passe because they were simple story-

tellers. "Yes," said Jones. "Both Irwin and I write books that have a beginning, a middle, and an end, and we try to entertain our readers."

This was before unreadable and unspeakable individuals such as Salman Rushdie and Jacques Derrida had confused the issue of literature with their Satanic verses and deconstructionist criticism. Still, we found plenty of ammunition against the modernists. Having taken copious notes, which Jones helped me clarify, I bade him and Gloria adieu and thanked them for everything. I had spent six hours with them but it felt like much less.

A couple of weeks later the Joneses and the Shaws were having dinner at a bistro when the Time magazine article that had proclaimed the two men dead as novelists came up. Shaw, with whom I skied and played tennis in Gstaad and in Antibes, was outraged. "Who the hell are these no-talents to pass judgment on us?" He then made a few choice remarks about the press.

That is when Jones told him that despite Time, they were quite fortunate. "A kid °I was 35° came to see me last month, and he had a family to support on \$8,000 per year that Buckley paid him. He had a strange and very long name, a Greek one."

"That's funny," said Shaw. "I know somebody like that. His name is Taki Theodoracopulos."

"Yeah, that's him," said Jones.

"Well," said Shaw, "Taki is not married, has no kids, does the occasional article for NR, and in case you're interested I am going on his yacht in the south of France next week."

"Son of a bitch," spluttered Jones. "I've been had by a fascist."

Years later, in Bridgehampton, at a wonderful Fourth of July luncheon given by Liz Fondaras, Shaw recounted the story to me. He was his usual amiable and wonderful self, and couldn't stop laughing. Gloria Jones, too, thought it rather funny. James Jones had sadly passed away. Shaw himself died soon after, but I shall always remember both men's kindness, although I would not have wanted to be near Jones the night he found out that more often than not struggling Greek writers have shipowners as fathers.

--Taki

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The Thin Red Line: An Appreciation

A host of activities in 1995 commemorated the 50th anniversary of World War II. While it was unquestionably the most savage and brutal conflict in human history, it was also the most idealistic and morally righteous endeavor in modern memory. It has emblazoned itself upon two generations as the "Great Crusade" and has been celebrated as a kind of Zoroastrian struggle of the inevitable but desperate victory of Good over Evil.

It is generally accepted that the despair and disillusion of the Vietnam-era veteran must have been wholly absent from the experiences of the survivors of World War II. But, for James Jones, wars have always been fought by individuals caught in a maelstrom of deterministic forces and Boethian "Fortuna." Jones, perhaps more than any other writer of his generation, focused on the pitiful plight of the "grunt"; the quintessential pawn in a chess game played by geo-political masters. Jones sought to remind us that regardless of the great scope of war, whether honorable or horrific, wars are always fought by men less imbued with ideals than with a desire to merely survive.

In *The Thin Red Line*, Jones presents in his terse and naturalistic style a microcosm of all wars--a struggle of ordinary men to fulfill their derived and distorted vision of honor and glory and to survive. To this end, Jones focuses on a single array of soldiers, "C for Charlie" Company, as they attempt to dislodge the Japanese from several strategic positions on Guadalcanal.

From the beginning, the reader meets a continuous stream of flat, one-dimensional characters--no multi-faceted Hamlet-like figures populate this battlefield. Jones' characters are shallow, base and underdeveloped. They seem like the interchangeable parts of an enormous military machine. But this is exactly what Jones tries to achieve. This is what a military organization demands--young men incomplete as human beings, without direction and capable of being molded into a fighting unit of man-children who respond more to drill and ceremony than to thought and deliberation. We do not get to know these men because they do not know themselves.

"C for Charlie" Company is peppered with soldiers with nondescript, monosyllabic names such as Blane, Band, Culp, Culn, Keck, Beck, Wick, Bead, Cash, Dale, Doll, Bell and others whose names sound almost onomatopoeic or just plain guttural. They bespeak very little individualism or even any ethnic flavor. In fact, they are devoid of ethnicity, memory or development.

The Thin Red Line is among the most purely naturalistic war novels in American literature. There is a thread of determinism that connects the theology of John Calvin, the psychology of Thomas Hobbes and the physiology of B.F. Skinner. The events that occur are sometimes unpredictable because life is unpredictable, and sometimes the events are predictable simply because life is predictable. This is raw naturalism. The men of "C for Charlie" Company quickly learn that to survive means to be even more brutal than the enemy. Like William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* as they march into the jungle, their superficial clothes of humanity must be stripped away to reveal their naked baseness. The epitome of man's vileness and ignobility occurs when one soldier suffers the indignity of being attacked by a Japanese soldier while in the process of "taking a crap." He somehow manages to survive the ordeal but with his pants around his ankles and feces between his legs. There is little honor on either side at this Dantean level of baseness and unnatural activity as the soldiers even reduce themselves further from humanity by wrenching the teeth out of the mouths of the decaying Japanese corpses in order to trade them as souvenirs in return for the necessary ingredients to make "hooch." The inhumanity continues as even their sexuality is pubescent and unrestrained. Some engage in homosexual acts certain they are not gay, but merely releasing primal urges. Others dream only of their wives not as soul mates but as consenting sexual appetites feeding off each other's lust.

Of course, the controlling force in this Pandemonium of self-survival, sustenance and sex is the military bureaucracy. The orders come from above and must be obeyed with Abraham-like fidelity. Captain Stein, one of the few men whose names connotes an ethnicity, sincerely attempts to complete his mission and save his men despite his lack of experience. He finds himself torn between his native intelligence and his orders. Eventually, things work out and the day's events are a success; but his hesitancy in questioning his orders is unforgivable. In startling succession he is praised, decorated and relieved of his command.

The battle takes place in April, but it is the cruel April of T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*, not the fruitful April of Chaucer. In the end, the campaign has been a success, but the Medieval concept of honorable "individualistic warfare" has been replaced by what Jones views as the more modern concept of "collective warfare." Jones expresses his contempt for war in the words of Sergeant West that all wars are conflicts over property for which the "grunt" has no interest nor share. All wars are fought for "property, property, all for property."

The 50th anniversary of the Second World War may indeed have been a time for self-congratulatory exercises, but it was also a fine time to reread *The Thin Red Line*. James Jones, like Sherwood Anderson, Frank Norris and John Steinbeck, writes about the commonness of men for the common man.

-- Robert P. Jackson, Ph.D., Cranston, R.I.

Jones Tribute Hosted by New Hampshire College

Plymouth State College in New Hampshire hosted a tribute to James Jones in April as part of the events surrounding the 50th anniversary of the end of World War II.

The college's tribute to Jones consisted of a screening of *From Here To Eternity* and the acclaimed PBS documentary, *James Jones: Reveille to Taps*, co-produced by Society board member J. Michael Lennon, and a month-long exhibit of Jones literary memorabilia from the private collection of Warren Mason of the college's business department. All events were free and open to the public.

As part of the documentary presentation, Lennon discussed Jones' life in the Pacific Campaign, Europe and the United States, as well as the making of the film. TV Guide has called the documentary "one of those glories of public television--the impeccable literary biography."

The Quotable James Jones

Q: You are a writer who's capable of conveying a deep experience. As somebody who has been affected by this, I'd like to know what has been the deep experience of your life?

Jones: Well, I guess that the war would certainly be one of the major experiences of my life.

Q: How about the war compared to the challenge of making sense out of the war at the typewriter? Which is the deeper experience?

Jones: Well, I think the second. Trying to make sense out of anything at a typewriter is probably the deeper experience. But this is something that's almost impossible to write about. I don't know why. First, you've got the whole creative complex that makes up the man and the work and so on. But then you're writing about a writer writing, and this is almost impossible to do well, I think.

* * *

Q: How do you feel about *From Here to Eternity*? You've set yourself something that you have to beat.

Jones: I don't feel like that.

Q: You don't feel that way?

Jones: No. I mean each novel is a life itself. The thing about a novel is that you finish it and you start something else, and then there's, well, there's this time lapse of about six months before the book comes out, and by this time it's no longer part of you. That life is dead ... gone. You're on something else, so it isn't really you who wrote it anyway.

Excerpted from "The Writer Speaks: A Conversation between James Jones and Leslie Hanscom," James Jones: A Checklist by John R. Hopkins. Detroit: Gale Research, 1974.

***Pistol* Manuscript Given To University of Illinois**

The original manuscript of *The Pistol* and a letter written by James Jones has been given to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library's Rare Book Collection.

The book was part of the private library of Joyce Heath Pennington's late husband, Glenn. Mrs. Pennington is a Robinson, Ill., native and a member of the Society.

After her husband's death, Mrs. Pennington contacted former Society president and University of Illinois English professor George Hendrick and offered the manuscript to the university. Mr. Pennington had purchased it from the estate of Judy Garland, as well as a letter Jones sent when he gave the manuscript to Garland.